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A choral Christmas

Celebrate a glorious festive season with the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge

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The Christmas music we'd happily do without...

Beware the tomatoes! Opera's meanest audiences

John Rutter reveals his favourite Christmas carols

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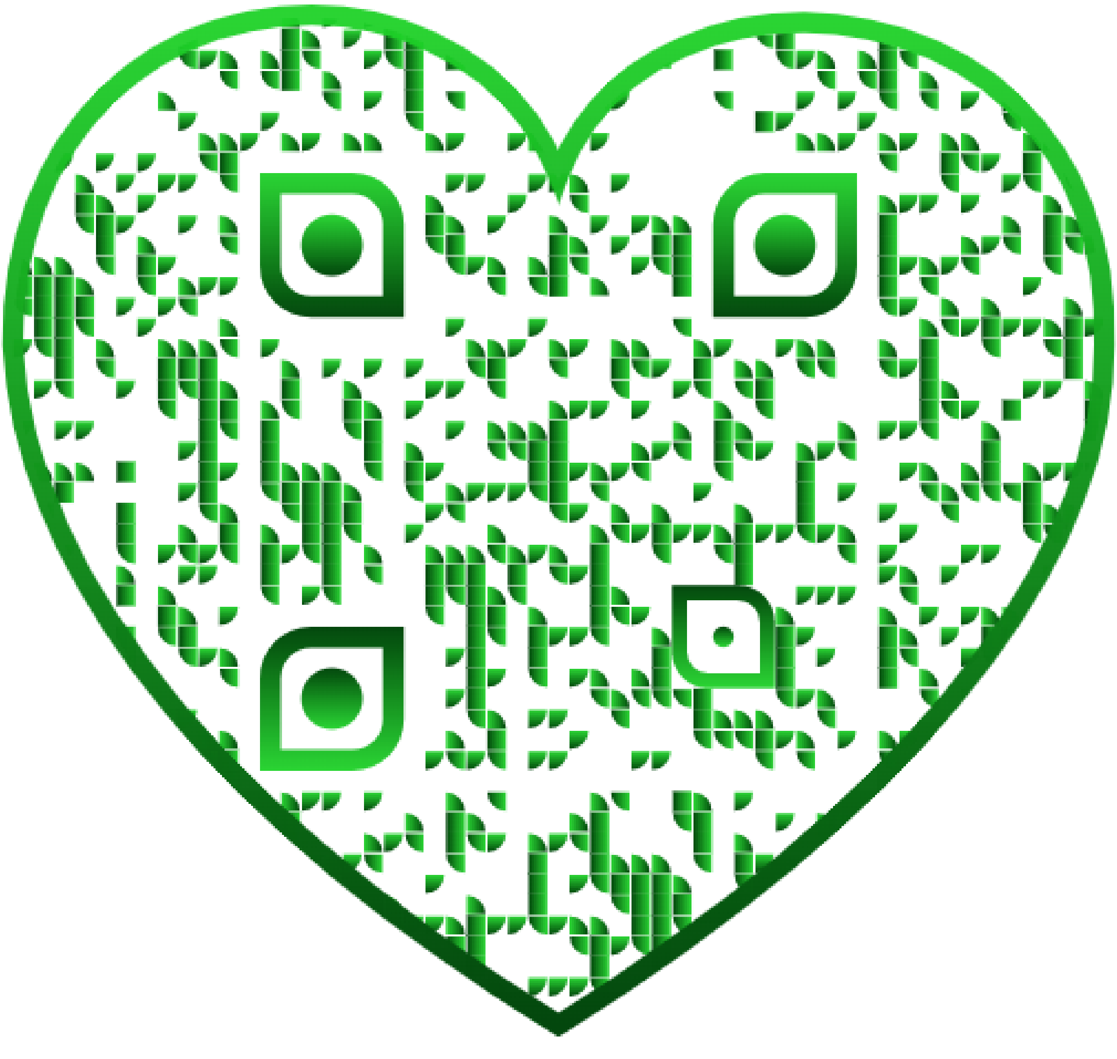
Famous musical parents
Are they a bonus or a burden?

Morten Lauridsen
The composer of today's must-hear carol

A song for all faiths
Roxanna Panufnik's uplifting festive work



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The Nutcracker
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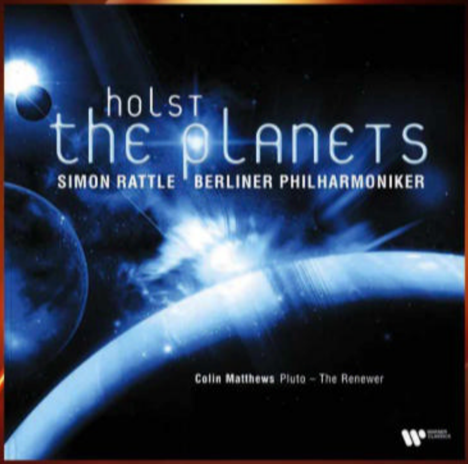
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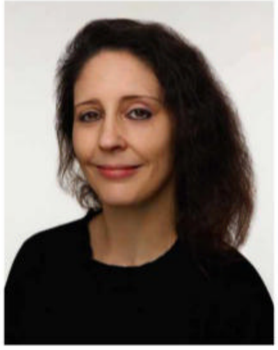

I remember well the first time I heard the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge. A trip with my parents to that fine university city presented the opportunity to hear services at both John's and King's on the same day. Beforehand, King's College felt like the star draw, and looking up at the chapel's breathtaking fanned ceiling was incredibly special. But St John's, the 'other' Cambridge choir, was well worth hearing, my father assured me – and he was right. While King's was ethereal and atmospheric – a product of its chapel acoustics – John's was solid and earthy, full of raw passion and energy.

That was 30 years ago, but a mere flash in the pan, given the choir's 350-year history. And despite the much-publicised introduction of girls and women to its ranks in 2022, St John's holds deeply valued traditions. On page 24, the choir's music director Christopher Gray speaks to Ashutosh Khandekar about adapting its identity to the 21st century while maintaining its renowned 'St John's sound'.

Elsewhere in this festive issue, legendary composer John Rutter shares his favourite Christmas carols (p20) and composer Roxanna Panufnik tells Amanda Holloway about *Aurora*, her new multi-faith celebration (p40). But if all that cheer feels too cloying and saccharine, turn to page 32 where we share the Christmas music we love to hate. Wishing you all a wonderful Yuletide!

Charlotte Smith

Charlotte Smith *Editor*

THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

Ashutosh Khandekar

Journalist and critic

'I was fascinated to learn how Christopher Gray's Northern Irish upbringing brings a radical streak to his respect for St John's heritage. His first Christmas album with the choir captures this blend of tradition and innovation.' ***Page 24***

Amanda Holloway

Music journalist

'What perfect timing it was to be sitting in composer Roxanna Panufnik's garden studio during a spectacular thunderstorm and talking about the Aurora Borealis – the inspiration for her new choral and orchestral work.' ***Page 40***

Harriet Constable

Writer and filmmaker

'Venice is known for its jewelled palaces and mud-licked canals, but once it was the "Republic of Music". I discovered its original music school, which was also an orphanage for girls, and the workplace of Antonio Vivaldi.' ***Page 50***

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COVER: RICHARD CANNON **THIS PAGE:** RICHARD CANNON, JULIE WESELY, NICHOLAS POSNER, GETTY

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Plus the concert audience behaviour that particularly irks us (see p54)
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Self-importantly following a miniature score of the work being played
Deputy editor Jeremy Pound
Leaving as soon as the applause begins
Reviews editor Miranda Bardsley
Texting and scrolling on phones
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Still talking when the performance starts
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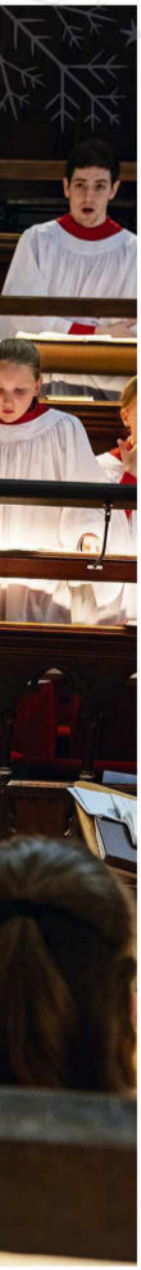

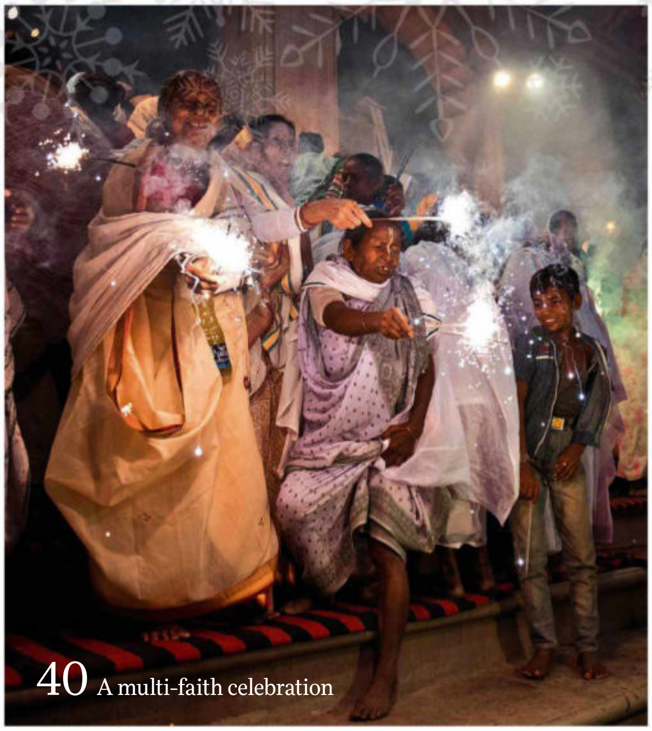

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Christmas reviews

Your guide to the best new recordings and books

Mezzo Anna Lucia Richter bears Mahler's fateful vocal works with supreme grace

74 Recording of the Month

Mahler: Songs of Fate

Anna Lucia Richter

'Richter's mezzo voice is impressively true and sure, ranging from a dusky low register to lovely floating high notes'

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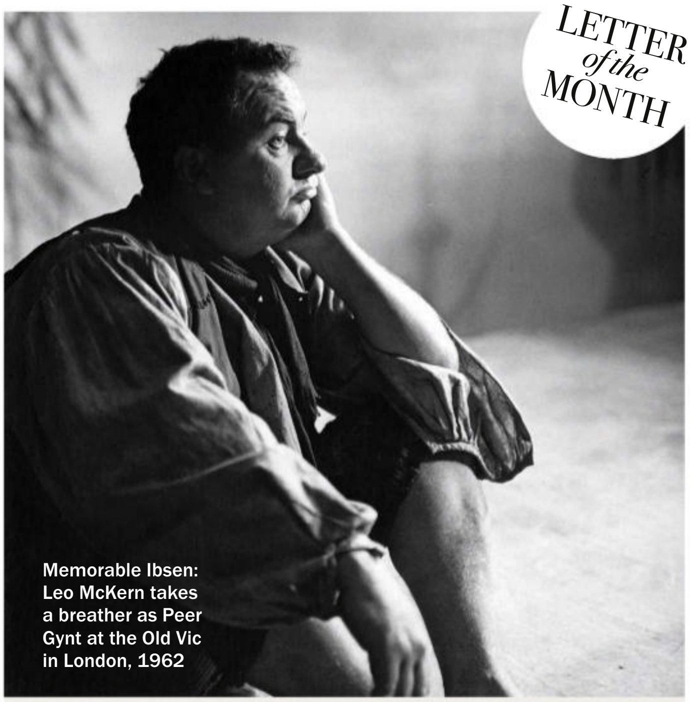

LETTER of the MONTH

Memorable Ibsen: Leo McKern takes a breather as Peer Gynt at the Old Vic in London, 1962

GETTY

Jolly frolics in the company of Peer Gynt

Your feature about the composition of Grieg's *Peer Gynt* (December) reminded me of two incidents relating to Ibsen's original. I saw it staged in the early 1960s starring an (even then) portly Leo McKern, who bounded about the stage like a ten year-old, even turning cartwheels which I can still visualise when I listen to the Grieg. The other was when that old reprobate Wilfrid Lawson was cast as the Button Moulder. A friend visited him at the theatre and they sat at the back of the gallery during the performance. At one point in the play, Lawson, who was already three sheets to the wind, turned to his friend and said 'And this is where I come on'.

***Peter Gildener,** Dunnington*

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Eating in peace

Hugh Allen's letter (December) about piped music in pubs and restaurants raises a pertinent question. What, or who is it for? The staff? I doubt it. Several have told me that an endlessly repeated playlist drives them crazy. For the punters? I don't think so. My approach when asking if the muzak can be turned off is always to insist that if a single customer complains, then of course it should be restored. There's never a peep out of anyone. Nobody notices. Fortunately, we silence-seekers are not alone! Pipedown – pipedown.org.uk – is a splendid organisation which campaigns against piped muzak (not, emphatically, against live music) in public spaces. Its occasional members' newsletter, listing muzak-free eateries, is a good read, and supporters include Stephen Fry, Joanna Lumley and Simon Rattle. The late Alfred Brendel lent his name to the campaign too, observing that 'silent' is an anagram of 'listen'. A pianist of my acquaintance used to travel with wire cutters in his pocket and would surreptitiously snip a cable if his request for peace were denied. Not that I'm suggesting such criminal behaviour of course…

***Andrew Keener,** New Malden*

Convincing Cruz

I enjoyed reading your article about actors having to 'play' instruments on screen (*Screen players*, November). There are many more examples that could have been mentioned, but I wonder how many readers know that Penelope Cruz 'played' the french horn in the Spanish-language film *Alegre ma non troppo*? Her 'playing' of the solo in the overture to *Prince Igor* is quite convincing!

***Andrew Cochlin,** Eastbourne*

Let's get physical?

In his review of Mahan Esfahani's new recording of Book I of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Instrumental Reviews, November), Michael Church writes that 'Liner notes… are the main reason why most readers of this magazine emphatically prefer a physical CD to a will-o-the-wisp version floating in a digital void'. Firstly, how does he know that this is the case? Secondly, I have been using Qobuz streaming for many years, and it (and some other providers) give me a) generally better-than-CD resolution; and b) in the vast majority of cases with classical releases, access to the sleevenotes via iPad or similar. So why would I prefer a physical product?

***Paul Graber,** via email*

Quality streaming

I listen to BBC Radio 3 most days and to Sounds frequently to catch up on missed broadcasts and to archived

content. How wonderful it would be if the broadcasting/streaming quality of the BBC's output, currently MP3 compressed, matched my other listening on Qobuz – at better-than-CD sampling rates. I'd not object to paying a premium for that, albeit I'd hope for some rebate as a licence holder.
Eric Webb, *Milton Keynes*

Lightweight tango

It was a disappointment to read in the October issue the unabashedly eurocentric article about tango by Claire Jackson (*It takes two...*). While the Danish Jacob Gade's *Tango Jalousie* is mentioned no fewer nine (!) times, nothing is said about such established tango themes as *La Comparsita*, *Caminito*, *Mi Buenos Aires querido*, *Adiós Nonino*, *Volver* and *Sur* to name just a few, composed by luminaries such as Matos, Troilo, Villoldo etc. and sung by great artists like Alberto Castillo, Tita Merello, Mercedes Simone, Amelita Baltar (with her 'Balada para un loco') and so many others. Among the many *orquestas típicas* of tango's golden age we have those led by Anibal Troilo ('Pichuco', as he was called), Juan D'Arienzo ('The King of Rhythm'), Osvaldo Pugliese ('When you just want to dance') and so on. In my very personal tango trinity I have the almost operatic Susana Rinaldi, Roberto 'Polaco' Goyeneche (pictured left in the 1970s) with his superlative theatrical phrasing and, in the very midst, the legendary Carlos Gardel, 'El Zorzal Criollo', who is mentioned by your deputy editor Jeremy Pound in the *Music to my Ears: the BBC Music Magazine team's current favourites* column – something that apparently didn't get Claire Jackson's attention. Yes, some points are made about how tango music has been sort of reinvented by Astor Piazzolla, exemplified by cellist Yo-Yo Ma in *Soul of the Tango* from almost 30 years ago. Nice, but very much as seen from Europe and Los Angeles, California...
Quintin Gumucio Castellon,
Enköping, Sweden

Under, not over

I read your article about overrated composers (August issue) and, frankly, I found it quite appalling! This was especially true about what was said about Mendelssohn and Brahms. Of course, I realise everyone has their own taste and opinion, but what I think is really needed is an article about underrated composers. For such a list, composers I would include are Simon Mayr, Franz Schreker, Joachim Raff, Albéric Magnard, Kurt Atterberg and George Lloyd.
William Bartlett,
Simi Valley, CA, US

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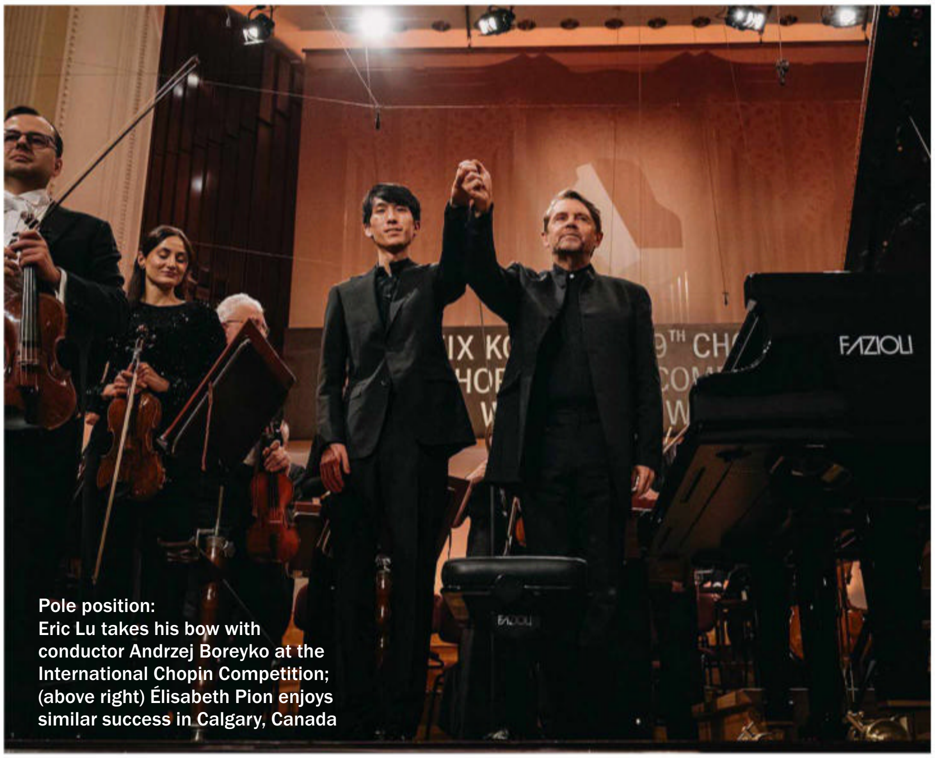
The *full* score

Our pick of the month's news, views and interviews



Pole position:
Eric Lu takes his bow with conductor Andrzej Boreyko at the International Chopin Competition; (above right) Élisabeth Pion enjoys similar success in Calgary, Canada

Eric Lu takes coveted Chopin prize

American pianist adds to his Leeds victory in 2018

Good things come to those who wait. And for Eric Lu, that wait involved staying up until 2.30am to discover that he was the winner of the 19th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in late October. With most of the audience having gone to bed and little more than a handful of die-hard journalists still around to hear the result, the American pianist, 27, learnt that, after a five-hour deliberation among the 17-person jury, his performance of Chopin's Concerto No. 2 in F minor had lifted him to top spot in the final, earning him a €60,000 (£52,500) prize and a major career boost.

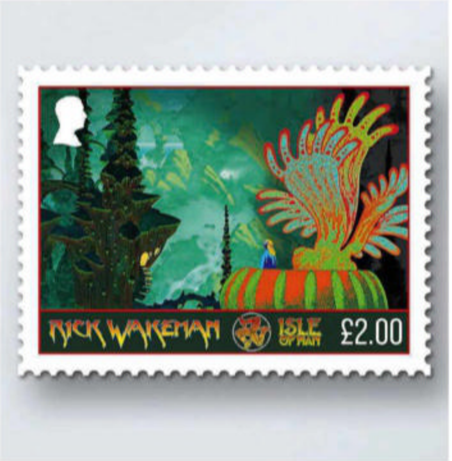
BBC Music Magazine readers may well be familiar with the winner's name. In 2018, Lu enjoyed victory in the Leeds International Piano Competition, which was followed the next year by his debut at the BBC Proms and two years as a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist. Reflecting after the Chopin Competition that it was 'such an honour' to win first prize, Lu explained that 'Chopin is such a personal composer. His music gives you so many possibilities and freedoms, but I think that you have to give your sincere soul to the music. Everyone is different, depending on their nature, but you cannot try to be fake in it or do superficial things.'

> 'Chopin is such a personal composer. His music gives you so many possibilities'

First contested in 1927 and held every five years, the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition can count the likes of Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich and Krystian Zimerman among its former winners and remains as prestigious and popular as ever. This year, 640 players applied to compete, with 84 making it to the competition itself and then 11 to the final, where each had to play one of Chopin's two piano concertos alongside the Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61.

Meanwhile, just a week later, pianist Élisabeth Pion was also celebrating, this time as winner of the Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary, Canada. In this instance, the 29-year-old Canadian played her way to victory with performances including Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor alongside the Isidore String Quartet and Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra in the final. Pion, who also took the competition's Audience Prize, wins $100,000 CAD (£54,000) for her hard work, as well as significant career support. Dating back to 1992, the triennial Honens used to name a number of successful 'laureates' each competition, but since 2012 has crowned just the one overall winner.

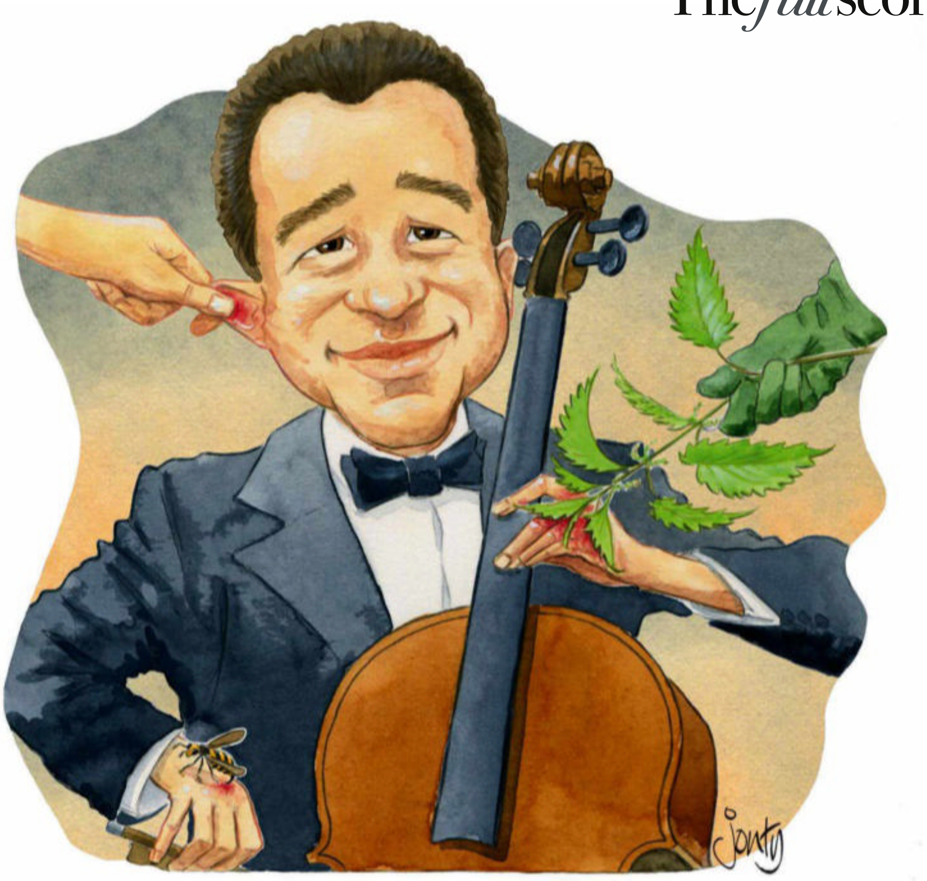
WOJCIECH GRZEDZINSKI, TIM NGUYEN/FIFTH WALL MEDIA



Man of letters: Rick Wakeman (below) is honoured

Yes man gets official stamp of approval

The Isle of Man Post Office has paid tribute to one of the island's most famous former residents, Rick Wakeman (left), by issuing a set of stamps based on the keyboard legend's album cover artwork. Designed by Roger Dean, the distinctive imagery – of colourful landscapes, wildlife and his trademark font – initially adorned LPs made by Wakeman both as a solo artist and during his time as a member of Prog Rock group Yes. Wakeman, who studied piano at the Royal College of Music before turning his sights rockwards, says he is 'very overwhelmed and very proud' by the honour from the island which he called home for over a decade from 1987.



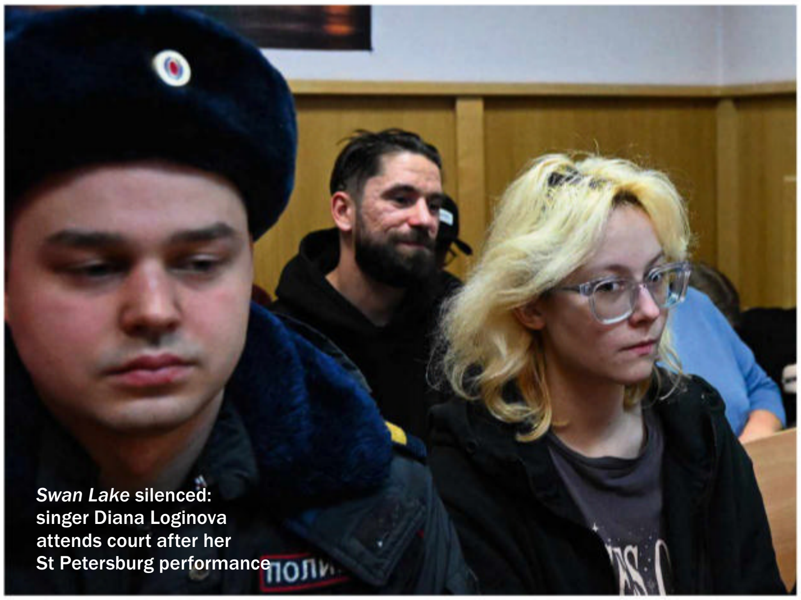
Take away the pain with a scale or two...

Feeling a few aches and pains? If so, let us recommend a dose of cello or piano practice. When, in tests at Aarhus University, scientists induced pain into the hands of 19 musicians and 20 non-musicians and then sent magnetic pulses into their brains to map their response over the following days, the findings were startling – the musicians proved consistently more resilient to pain than the non-musicians, increasingly so the more trained the musician. While the scientists insist this doesn't mean that playing music is a means of anaesthetic, they hope it may lead to further findings. We also suggest a prescription – sorry, subscription – to *BBC Music* may help...

Russians defy *Swan Lake* ban

Nearly 150 years after its premiere, *Swan Lake* is increasingly enjoying fame of an unexpected kind in its home country – namely, as a symbol of protest against Vladimir Putin's regime. In October, Russian authorities were quick to react when young demonstrators in St Petersburg's Kazanskaya Square joined in a performance of the song 'Swan Lake Collective', breaking up the gathering and arresting the 18-year-old singer Diana Loginova.

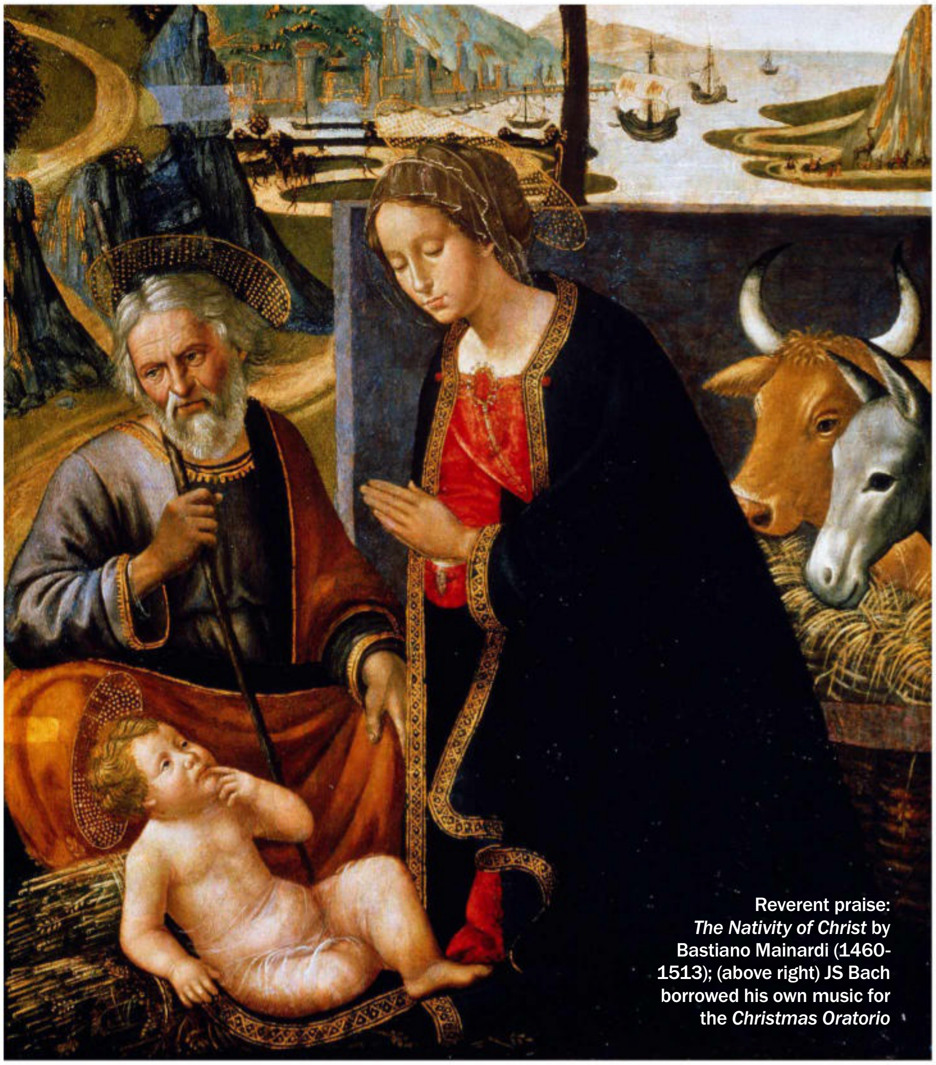
Written by Russian rapper Noize MC, who now lives abroad, 'Swan Lake Collective' features anti-Putin lyrics such as 'The old man still clings to his throne, afraid to let go' and 'When the tsar dies, we'll dance again – *Swan Lake* on every screen', set to a tune from Tchaikovsky's ballet. The choice of musical inspiration is no accident. In the late Soviet era, *Swan Lake* was played on state radio whenever the leader died, and so became associated with a change of regime. That same association is still implied by its use today, though now in a subversive way, and imagery associated with the ballet, such as the four cygnets, has also been seen painted as graffiti in public spaces. (See *Building a Library*, p.70)

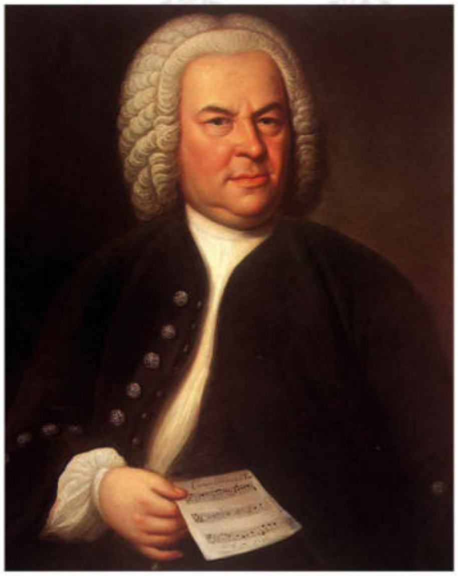


***Swan Lake* silenced: singer Diana Loginova attends court after her St Petersburg performance**

GETTY, ROGER DEAN ILLUSTRATION: JONTY CLARK

TIMEPIECE This month in history





Reverent praise: ***The Nativity of Christ*** **by Bastiano Mainardi (1460-1513); (above right) JS Bach borrowed his own music for the** ***Christmas Oratorio***

CHRISTMAS 1734

Bach's recycled choral music brings festive cheer to Leipzig

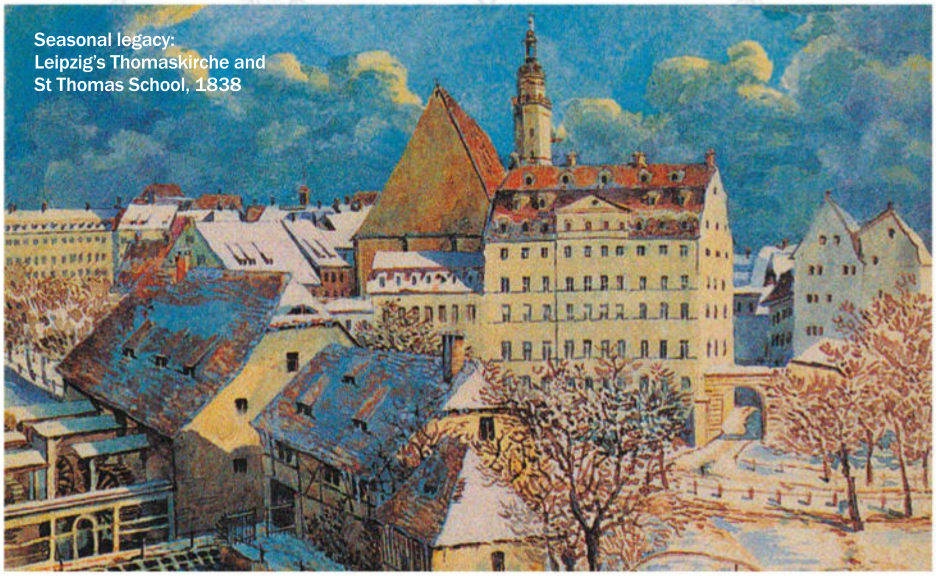
'Shout, exult, arise, praise these days! Glorify what the Almighty today has done!' Early on the morning of 25 December 1734, these words resounded from the choir stalls of the Thomaskirche, Leipzig, to a jubilant accompaniment of festive timpani, pealing trumpets and scampering violins. Seated at a keyboard, the church's director of music Johann Sebastian Bach marshalled the musicians in a performance of the cantata *Jauchzet, frohlocket! Auf, preiset die Tage*, which preceded the sermon in the morning service.

Jauchzet, frohlocket! was the first of six cantatas Bach had specially assembled for that year's Christmas season, a cycle collectively titled the *Weihnachtsoratorium* (*Christmas Oratorio*) which told the story of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. As the exuberant opening movement echoed round the building, some in the congregation may well have experienced glimmers of recognition. The music seemed somehow familiar: could they possibly have heard it before?

The answer was yes. A year earlier Bach had written a cantata (*Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!*) for the birthday of Maria Josepha, Queen of Poland and Electress of Saxony, and performed it at a coffee house on Leipzig's fashionable Katharinenstrasse. Four of its movements resurfaced a year later, with new words, in the *Christmas Oratorio*. Three more of Bach's cantatas had movements similarly cut-and-pasted to the *Oratorio*, and in total around 20 of its 64 movements were taken from previously performed works and were not newly composed music.

Why did Bach do this? Why borrow 'old' material when he could have written new? One theory is that, pushed for time, he used recycling as a way of putting the *Oratorio* together as rapidly as possible. There may be truth in this, but Advent, with its emphasis on penitence and with limits placed on large-scale musical performances, was not a particularly busy time for Bach. He probably had plenty of opportunities for composing.

There were, though, other reasons for re-using movements he had written already. One was their sheer quality. The glorious opening movement of *Tönet, ihr Pauken!*, for instance, had been heard just once before in public. Why not give it a second



Seasonal legacy: Leipzig's Thomaskirche and St Thomas School, 1838

airing? The music had, however, originally been written as a secular birthday greeting. How could it suddenly be deemed appropriate for heralding the Son of God, bringing salvation to a sinful world? Easily enough, Bach would have argued. The key 'Affekt' (or 'dominant emotion') of *Tönet, ihr Pauken!* is joyfulness and gratitude, the same sentiments expressed in *Jauchzet, frohlocket!*'s opening movement. Why not recycle, and let it be enjoyed again?

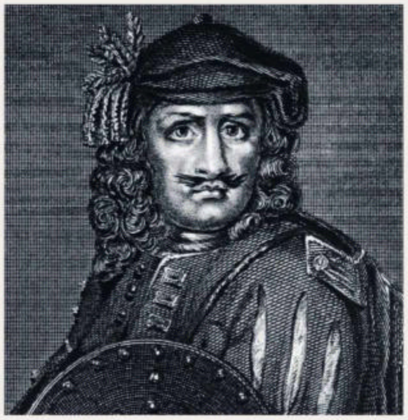
Reports mention disruptive behaviour such as throwing objects from the gallery

For the jobbing Baroque composer, there was nothing underhand or morally dubious about such self-borrowing. It was an accepted modus operandi and would scarcely have raised an eyebrow in the Thomaskirche when *Jauchzet, frohlocket!* was premiered on Christmas Day. The service probably began at 7am and lasted up to four hours. About 2,500 people would have attended, although a significant number typically straggled in late – arriving just in time for the sermon, they may have missed the chance to hear Bach's new work enirely. Nor was the congregants' behaviour invariably pious. Reports mention disruptive behaviour such as hand-waving, newspaper-reading and throwing objects from the gallery. Some worshippers even had their own private booths ('Capellen'), where they occasionally conversed or laughed out loud during the service.

Bach would, however, have been well used to this, and would not have been unduly distracted as the *Christmas Oratorio* was gradually unveiled in all its splendour. The six cantatas were presented, one per service, over a 13-day period in the Thomaskirche, culminating on 6 January (the Feast of Epiphany). Four of them had parallel performances in Leipzig's other main church, the Nikolaikirche, where Bach was also in charge of the music. Arias, recitatives and chorales combined in a splendidly uplifting sequence lasting two-and-a-half hours in total, with perhaps as few as eight singers sharing the vocal duties.

How did the Leipzig congregations react? We have no way of knowing, nor is it clear whether the *Christmas Oratorio* was ever again performed 'complete' in Bach's own lifetime. Today, its popularity is greater than ever, and it is regularly mounted, in whole or in part, at the Christmas season, often as an alternative to Handel's perhaps over-familiar *Messiah*. These single-evening performances, often in secular spaces, would undoubtedly have surprised Bach, who conceived the *Oratorio* as deeply embedded in the act of Lutheran worship, and in the Christian faith that he adhered to his entire life. ***Terry Blain***

GETTY



Cattle rustler supreme: Rob Roy MacGregor

Also in December 1734...

2nd: After lengthy negotiations, delegates from the British and Russian governments sign **The Anglo-Russian Treaty of Friendship and Commerce** in St Petersburg. To be recognised by Russia as 'the most favoured nation', Britain gains superior legal status over other Western trading nations, while 'a true, sincere, firm and perfect Peace, Amity and good intelligence' between the two nations is also established.

18th: With castrato Giovanni Carestini in the title role, Handel's opera **Oreste** is premiered at Covent Garden Theatre in London where, according to *The Bee* magazine, it is 'perform'd with great Applause'. Adapted from Euripides's play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the opera is a 'pasticcio', consisting of material that Handel had previously composed for other works.

21st: Philipp Hyacinth, Fourth Prince of Lobkowicz, dies aged 54. A close friend of the famous lutenist Silvius Leopold Weiss and a keen composer and lutenist himself, the prince went on extensive tours of Europe, collecting musical scores on his way. At his estate in Eisenberg, he employed Alexander Gluck, father of the composer, as a forester.

24th: A fire completely destroys the **Royal Alcázar in Madrid**, residence of the Spanish royal family. Believed to have started in a room occupied by court artist Jean Ranc, the blaze rages for four days, rendering attempts to rescue artworks such as Velázquez's *La Expulsión de los moriscos* futile. The core of the palace, which was greatly extended in the 1500s, dated back to the ninth century.

28th: The Scottish outlaw **Rob Roy MacGregor** dies aged 63. A participant in the Jacobite Rising of 1715 and the Battle of Glen Shiel in 1719, Rob Roy gained notoriety through his personal vendetta, including regular cattle raids, against the Duke of Montrose. His life later inspired a novel by Walter Scott and, in turn, an overture by Berlioz and a 1995 film starring Liam Neeson.

Music to my ears

Dazzling talent: soprano Jeanine de Bique

The *BBC Music Magazine* team's current favourites...

Charlotte Smith *Editor*

A trip to the Swiss town of Andermatt was special not only for its snow-topped peaks and gourmet food, but for the chance to witness two performances in the resort's Concert Hall. Under music director Lena-Lisa Wüstendörfer, the resident Swiss Orchestra's considerable skills were on display in a programme of operatic arias, featuring talented soprano **Jeanine de Bique** – the perfect complement to Bach and Beethoven from the Budapest Festival Orchestra the previous evening.

Jeremy Pound *Deputy editor*

As someone whose very job involves immersing myself in Christmas music from mid-October, I have little empathy with those who annually make a point of moaning about even a single fairy light being turned on before Advent Sunday. And so, while they sit cheerlessly looking out at the November rain, I've been revelling in **The King's Singers**' 2014 *Joy To The World*, an album that packs in all the festive jollity that its title implies. Happy (early) Christmas!

Steve Wright *Content producer*

After several listens to **Doreen Carwithen**'s Concerto for Piano and Strings (1948), I'm left wondering how it's not a concert-hall regular. The opening movement is radiant and expansive – like sunlight gradually filling a room – with, as the work's title suggests, piano and strings in perfect balance. Later, I hear Carwithen's film music pedigree in the sparkling, joyous finale with its lyrical warmth and sense of completion.

Miranda Bardsley *Reviews editor*

The announcement of a new festive album from the **Miró Quartet** sent me back to their 2024 album *Home*, which explores what 'home' can mean through a carefully curated programme. Kevin Puts's title work dazzles, while Caroline Shaw's *Microfictions* pairs delicate string writing with fragmented spoken word. With works by Barber, Walker and Arlen's 'Over the Rainbow', it feels all at once nostalgic and entirely new.

Decades on stage: Leif Ove Andsnes recalls performances from early in his career

Concert Heaven Concert Hell

Top artists recall their best and worst performances

THIS MONTH
Leif Ove Andsnes *pianist*

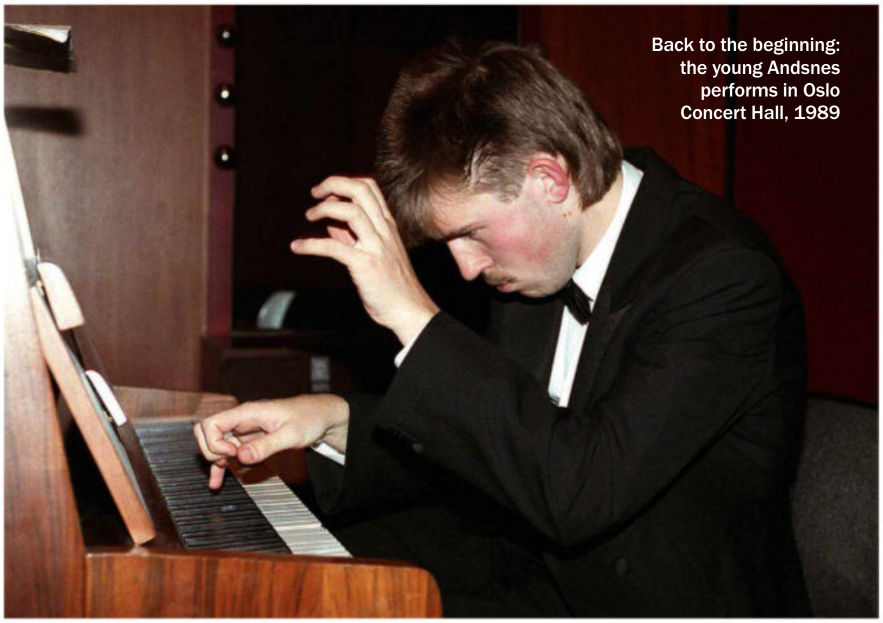
CONCERT HEAVEN

Beethoven Piano Sonata No. 31; Chopin Piano Sonata No. 3; Liszt Mephisto Waltz No. 1 etc
Solo debut tour, Oslo, Norway (1987)

When I think about what has been a really crucial experience in my life as a musician, I always come back to my debut recital when I just turned 17. I had studied for a couple of years at the music conservatory in Bergen with my teacher Jiri Hlinka, who really inspired me and said that it was important for pianists to make a debut. I applied for a scholarship for some money to support the recitals, with the first being in Bergen – my home town. The fourth was in Oslo, and it was the most important one – there was such a huge feeling of potential to it.

Music had always been very serious and important to me, but I'm from a small community so I wasn't surrounded by professional musicians until I was about 16. I wasn't used to going to concerts or being in contact with people who worked in this world every day. I'd played with a symphony orchestra once as a young talent but it wasn't part of my life, so I didn't know what it was to be a musician or even how to really prepare for a concert. As a 14 year-old, I had played my first recital with a big programme, but with these ones at 17, I was prepared in a completely different way; I was ready to be a professional. The realisation that 'Oh, people are listening to me and they're really enjoying this' was unbelievably inspiring. I saw how my life was going to take a turn.

I even remember the programme, which included Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis*, Beethoven's Op. 110 – which was



Back to the beginning: the young Andsnes performs in Oslo Concert Hall, 1989

beyond my understanding at that point, yet instinctively I found it so beautiful – Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* No. 1 and Chopin's Third Piano Sonata.

I had already won prizes and competitions, so there was a lot of buzz around the recital – there were lots of professional musicians and press in the audience – and I remember having this enormous feeling of a new world opening up. I couldn't sleep that night; I just sat staring at the wall for hours thinking, 'What did I experience just now?' It felt groundbreaking.

CONCERT HELL

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 4; Schumann Piano Concerto

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Brussels, Belgium (Approx. 1999)

I had a couple of memory slips during concerts when I was young, but this one was a really hellish night for me. I was on a tour with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and I was playing two concertos: Beethoven No. 4 and Schumann. In the third movement of the Schumann, there are two nearly identical virtuoso passages – one early in the movement and one later.

During our concert in Brussels, at the first passage, I went into what was supposed to be the second. I got into the wrong scale, the wrong key and I suddenly realised that I was completely lost with no way of finding my way back, because the orchestra's accompaniment is so discreet. I had to stop, go up to the conductor and say, 'We take it from here.'

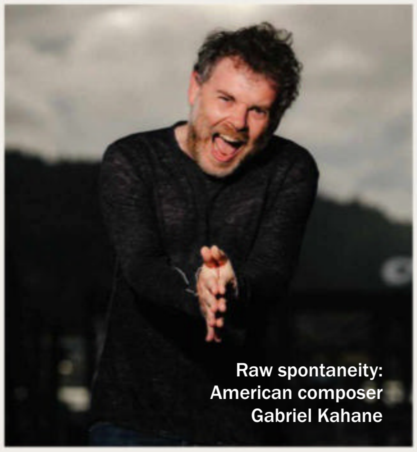
It was such a shock. Having memory slips as a child had been bad enough; it happened once when I was about ten and I didn't want to play without music for a couple of years. But as a professional pianist, I didn't think that sort of thing could happen, especially with the Schumann, which I had played several times and I really knew. What I didn't know was that this passage was a famous trap for pianists. One really needs to know the patterns of the passages; you cannot just rely on instinct.

That memory slip felt like such a catastrophe, but the good thing was that I was performing under the Finnish conductor Paavo Berglund, who I had played with a lot. He was such a wonderful man and conductor, and he was very cool about the situation, saying, 'Oh, that happens to everybody! Even Jascha Heifetz!' He couldn't care less; he just thought it was part of life. But I did not feel like it was part of life!

Another good thing, however, was that I was able to play it two days later on the tour and, although my pulse was rather high when we reached the passage, from then on I knew what the problem could be, and that was an advantage. Fortunately, I've had no experiences like that since – knock on wood – and it's been over 25 years…!

'Schubert 4 Hands', featuring Leif Ove Andsnes and Bertrand Chamayou, is out now on Warner Classics

HENRIK LAURVIK/NTB/BRIDGEMAN, HELGE HANSEN, MARCO BORGGREVE, JASON QUIGLEY, HARALD HOFFMANN



Raw spontaneity: American composer Gabriel Kahane

MyHero

Vision String Quartet violist ***Sander Stuart*** shares the group's admiration for composer and pianist ***Gabriel Kahane***

Florian, our first violinist, and I had been listening to Gabriel's music for a long time, on flights and so on. One day, Florian wrote to Gabriel on Instagram and said that it would be nice to build some sort of partnership and Gabriel replied instantly, which is one of the good things about the internet! We played with him earlier this year at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, which was the first time we'd met him.

Gabriel is a multi-functional musician. He has a singer-songwriter approach – he sings and plays the piano beautifully – but also plays classical music, and when we met him, he suggested we play Brahms's Piano Quintet together. His own music is quite complex. There are many different harmonies and modulations, and he picks random themes from, say, Beethoven and Brahms. It's intellectual, in a way, but always approachable too.

He also shows remarkable political awareness, and often channels his reflections on current cultural and political developments into raw, spontaneous musical sketches that he shares on Instagram almost daily. At times, it feels as though he's composing a kind of ongoing musical about the everyday madness around him – turning the turbulence of the world into a continuous source of creativity and inspiration.

He is very aware of his German roots. In our first rehearsal together, he opened up quite a lot and told us about how his German-Jewish grandmother had fled via Hamburg to the US in World War II. In her last years, she had written a memoir of her life which he read and then wrote an album based on it. That was very touching to hear.

The Vision Quartet's new album 'In the Fields' is released in January on ACT

THE LISTENING SERVICE

Extremely good ideas

Bizarre they may seem, but music's most outlandish inventions and notions can also be just what is needed to unleash truly original thought, says **Tom Service**

ILLUSTRATION: MARIA CORTE MAIDAGAN

It's music history, Jim, but not as we know it. Edward Brooke-Hitching's *The Madman's Orchestra: The Greatest Curiosities From the History of Music* (see p97) seems, on the face of it, to be a collection of the bizarre and the grotesque, in which badger theremins, trumpets with 13 bells and organs made from the bodies of pigs are lavishly illustrated, and in which you can see Elgar's unsolved musical riddles alongside Hieronymus Bosch's diabolical instrumentarium in his *Garden of Earthly Delights*. There's even a picture and description of the German *Schandflöte*, the 'shame flute', a medieval torture device designed to put incompetent players who had offended the sensibilities of their listeners in an agony of infinite performance, with a metal brace around their necks, fingers fixed around the instrument.

So far, so freakish, but underneath his brilliantly researched trawls through the extremes of musical possibility, the essence of Brooke-Hitching's book is, I think, decidedly sane: not the 'Madman's Orchestra', but a revelation of what makes music history tick. Take Athanasius Kircher, the 17th-century German whose *Musurgia Universalis* is one of the most ambitious attempts to create an all-encompassing theory of music. As well as notating birdsong and dreaming up a cosmic organ that was responsible for the harmony of the birth of the world, Kircher, we learn, came up with magnificent thought experiments such as 'a canon which may be sung by 12,200,000 voices'. But he is also the first person to talk about the 'doctrine of the affections', the theory of how emotions are represented in music, which became the most important tenet of Baroque composers' imaginations. Kircher is not an insane outlier – he is central to the story.

Without such drive, passion and daring, the whole story of music would be very dull

The same goes for so many of the dreams, inventions and seemingly out-there inspirations of thinkers and theorists from across time and across the globe in Brooke-Hitching's book. The origins of the pipe organ in the water-organs of Ancient Greece, the ancient graphic notation for the soundscapes of Tibetan temples or the astounding images that Megan Watts Hughes made from her voice at the end of the 19th century, which look like fractal crystals long before Mandelbrot Sets – it's not that the brilliant minds and ideas in Brooke-Hitching's book represent the margins of music history; without their drive, passion and daring, the whole story of music would be a very dull place indeed.

As well as being maybe the single best illustrated book about music that I know, this is a mind-expanding and brain-boggling read that deserves its place as one of the most fascinating and the most rational histories of music you can find – with the possible exception of David Cranmer's stuffed badger that was turned into that theremin in 2012. I'll leave that for you to investigate...

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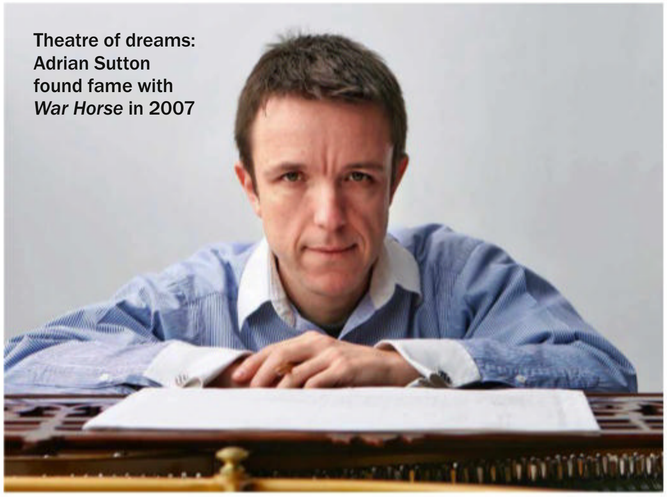
FAREWELL TO...


Theatre of dreams: Adrian Sutton found fame with *War Horse* in 2007

Adrian Sutton Born 1967 *Composer*
When, in an interview for *BBC Music Magazine* last year, Adrian Sutton was asked how the diagnosis of terminal cancer in 2022 had impacted his daily work as a composer, he replied that it had given him a 'massive laser focus' on what he should or shouldn't be doing. One of those must-do tasks was to compose a Violin Concerto which, performed by Fenella Humphreys, was at the heart of an album of Sutton's orchestral works that won the Premiere Award at this year's BBC Music Magazine Awards. Also on that same recording is the *War Horse Orchestral Suite*, a six-movement distillation of the score for the National Theatre (NT) play that put Sutton firmly on the map in 2007. After graduating from Goldsmith's College in the 1980s, the Kent-born Sutton began his career writing music for TV commercials and other media before coming to the notice of the NT director Tom Morris. As well as his scores for NT, he composed for other theatres as well as a number of orchestral, choral and chamber works.

David Wilde Born 1935 *Pianist and composer*
As he headed into his 70s and beyond, David Wilde embarked on a series of solo piano recordings for the Delphian label – of composers including Schumann, Chopin and Liszt – that enjoyed glowing reviews, not least for his beautiful sound and still scintillating technical prowess. It was around 50 years earlier, in 1961, that Wilde had come to prominence by winning the Liszt-Bartók Competition in Budapest, a success that would lead to high-profile performances with orchestras including the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and, in his home town of Manchester, the Hallé. The BBC Proms soon came calling, and Wilde would go on to play at the festival on nine occasions, in repertoire ranging from Brahms to Tippett. As well as serving as professor of piano at the Musikhochschule Hannover from 1981-2000, he also composed a number of works protesting against the abuse of human rights, including 1992's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*.

Also remembered...

The British composer **Jonathan Lloyd** *(born 1948)* defiantly trod his own path, refusing to follow trends, scoring for unconventional instruments and peppering his music with wit. His best-known works include 1981's *Toward the Whitening Dawn* in memory of John Lennon, and his Fourth Symphony, commissioned for the BBC Proms in 1988.

Over a career lasting more than five decades, the German baritone **Eike Wilm Schulte** *(born 1939)* appeared on major stages right across the globe, excelling in repertoire that was equally wide-ranging. It was, however, in Wagner in his home country that he above all made his mark – a member of opera companies in Wiesbaden and then Munich, he appeared at the Bayreuth festival on 12 consecutive seasons.

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THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Pick a theme... and name your seven favourite examples

British composer-conductor John Rutter shares the Christmas carols that mean the most to him

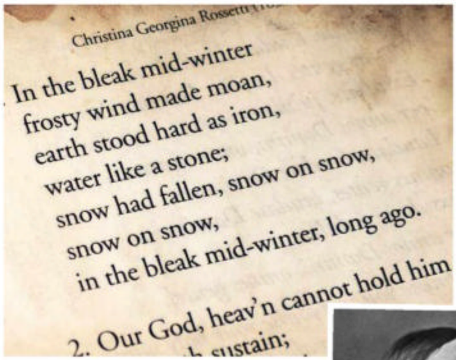
With his talent for creating memorable melodies, John Rutter is one of the most popular composers of English choral music. Born in London, he read music at Clare College, Cambridge, and later served as the college's director of music before founding his own choir, the Cambridge Singers, with whom he made multiple recordings. This autumn, he celebrated his 80th birthday with the release of *Reflections* on Decca Classics, which includes the first ever recording of his Piano Concerto, composed in 1979. The Choir of Clare College, Cambridge also marks his birthday with a new album of choral works on Harmonia Mundi.

Eric Milner-White
The Bidding Prayer

Before the carols start in King's College Chapel on Christmas Eve, the dean reads the Bidding Prayer which begins 'Beloved in Christ, be it at this Christmas-tide our care and delight to prepare ourselves to hear again the message of the angels.' Shakespeare would have been proud of it, but it was the work of Eric Milner-White, former army chaplain in the trenches of Flanders and dean of King's in the years after World War I. For me, this prayer is the moment when Christmas truly begins.

Michael Praetorius
Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen

There are carols I can return to again and again, and this one is high on my list, combining tenderness and strength in the space of its modest few bars. The old German melody is harmonised by the 17th-century Michael Praetorius, the words are 16th century, translated as 'Lo, how a rose e'er blooming' and they suit the music perfectly. I don't know who had the terrible idea of replacing them with 'A great and mighty wonder'. I cringe when I hear 'Repeat the hymn again', tautology reminiscent of Lina Lamont's 'our hard work ain't been in vain for nothing'.



Christina Georgina Rossetti

In the bleak mid-winter
frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow,
snow on snow,
in the bleak mid-winter, long ago.

2. Our God, heav'n cannot hold him
sustain;

Heinrich Suso *In dulci jubilo*

I have sung and conducted this carol countless times and have even written a musical fable about its origin, when dancing angels sang it one Christmas Eve to the 14th-century German monk Heinrich Suso, who wrote it down. It's a medieval earworm, a gem. The lilting melody makes you want to dance, the words are a delightful mash-up of Latin and rustic German, and the melody works as a perfect canon. Sing it at your Christmas party; the neighbours will pay to come and listen.

Peter Cornelius *The three kings*

No, not the ones who 'of Orient are', but the same three in what was once a solo song with piano by the 19th-century composer Peter Cornelius. Alas, his music is forgotten except for *The three kings* which was rescued from oblivion by the organist of Worcester Cathedral, Sir Ivor Atkins, who in 1930 made the arrangement in which a baritone soloist sings the melody while the piano part – the chorale *How brightly shines the morning star* – is allotted to choir. The ending, where the soloist sings 'offer my heart', is my favourite Christmas cadence.

Harold Darke *In the Bleak Midwinter*

This carol topped the last *BBC Music Magazine* poll for 'musicians' favourite carol', and I chose it as one of my Desert Island Discs. Darke's setting of Christina Rossetti's text, for me, touches the heart in a way that Holst's congregational setting cannot because the irregular metre of the poem fits his tune about as well as a 13-amp plug in a continental socket. I met Darke in his final years – though bewildered by the carol's fame, he was deeply touched by its lasting appeal.

Bob Chilcott
The Shepherd's Carol

This is a carol that never fails to bring tears to my eyes, even though it isn't sad. Bob is an old friend, an ex-King's chorister and a skilled, versatile composer. He wrote it in 2000 for his old choir, and it's a perfect fusion of words and music, ideally crafted for the acoustic of King's College Chapel. Sung almost shyly by the sopranos, it builds to a radiant climax for the full choir, then subsides into a gentle ending to the words 'Our love, our hopes, ourselves we give to your son, Lady'. By then I'm a sobbing heap.

Arr. David Willcocks
O come, all ye faithful

It's not actually my favourite Christmas hymn – *Of the Father's Heart Begotten* tops it – but it's transformed by David Willcocks's arrangement. That's because of the glorious descant, boldly taken from the 'Gloria' bit of *Ding dong! Merrily on high* – which is just about as renowned as the tune. Then, in the last verse, comes THE CHORD! It's just D minor with a B in the bass, when we reach 'Word [of the Father]' but its effect is magical. Reputedly several musician members of the congregation fainted at its first performance in 1960.

NICK RUTTER, GETTY

The joy of Christmas: John Rutter selects his favourite festive carols; (opposite) Peter Cornelius, composer of *The three kings*; the words to *In the Bleak Midwinter*

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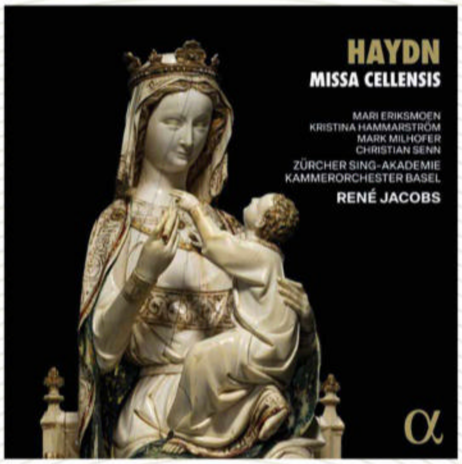
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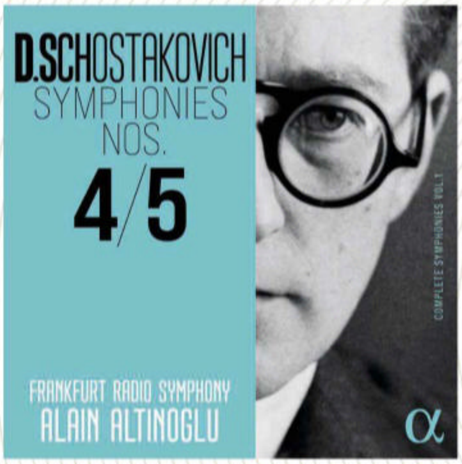
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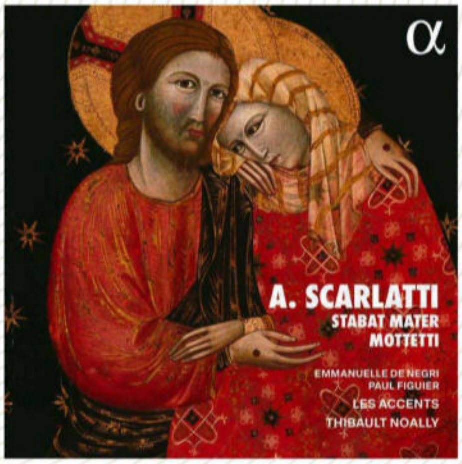
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Richard Morrison

There are far too many wonderful carols that have faded into obscurity

The little church choir in which I sang more than half a century ago had an unbreakable engagement every Christmas Eve: we would walk round the local cottage hospital singing carols. Some patients were clearly very ill, so the rules for us kids were 'nothing louder than *mezzo-piano*, don't stare and keep moving'. If patients did want to talk, our genial vicar walked just behind us – 'fielding compliments, complaints, concerns and any choccies on offer', as he put it.

But there was one moment when we did stand still and sing strongly. The hospital had a long corridor connecting its two wings, and its echo was astonishing. Our harmonies, which sounded so weedy as we moved through the wards, suddenly acquired extraordinary richness. And by some acoustical alchemy the result carried to the far corners of the hospital.

'It sounds like a swimming pool,' I exclaimed when I first encountered this magic corridor. 'It sounds like King's,' an old bass retorted. I was completely baffled. Did monarchs have some sort of built-in echo when they sang four-part harmonies?

In this corridor we always performed the same carol: *Angels from the Realms of Glory*. Why? Because its refrain, with the single word 'gloria' extended in a series of lush harmonic sequences, sounded absolutely fantastic in that acoustic. Years later I learnt that the carol's author – a radical 19th-century Scot called James Montgomery – never intended 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' to be the refrain. He had written 'Come and worship'. Later editors clearly decided this phrase was far too lowbrow and substituted the Latin instead. But as an awestruck nine year-old it was the sound of the carol echoing down the corridor that fascinated me, not the words.

These days you don't hear *Angels from the Realms* so much. People prefer its zippier half-sister – *Ding Dong! Merrily on high* – which has an even longer melismatic 'gloria' but lacks Montgomery's bleak assurance to sinners 'doomed for guilt to endless pains' that, if we behave ourselves, we might just escape hellfire. I guess warnings about hellfire are a little unfashionable nowadays too.

> Preserving carols is as vital as preserving ancient buildings – and a lot cheaper

The sad thing is that *Angels from the Realms* isn't the only carol in danger of disappearing. One problem is that thousands of schools have turned their back on fine old carols, opting instead for seasonal pop songs or trite modern ditties. But even in churches with serious choral traditions there has been, I think, a narrowing of the carol repertoire over my lifetime.

Case in point? The Christmas morning services in my youth invariably opened with a rousing hymn called *Christians, awake, salute the happy morn*. It relates the entire nativity saga in verses that unroll like majestic carpets of 18th-century rhetoric. I love the story of how it was created – as a poem titled 'Christmas Day for Dolly', written by a Manchester poet, John Byrom, as a gift for his teenage daughter Dorothy. It was then set to music by a local organist, John Wainwright, who was apparently so pleased with his tune that on Christmas Eve 1750 he brought his entire choir round to Byrom's house to sing it to him.

Yet today, I imagine, there is barely one church in 50 where *Christians, awake* is still sung. One cleric I questioned about this declared that the 'language was too complex' for congregations today. But isn't one fascination of ancient carols their sometimes mystifying language and metaphors? How, for example, did three ships sail into Bethlehem, a landlocked city on top of a hill? What are we to make of the bizarre horticultural miracles in *The Cherry Tree Carol*, an ancient fable so dark and enigmatic that the editors of the *New Oxford Book of Carols* detect a 'Jungian shadow' in its verses. And on the subject of trees, why do so many medieval carols use the metaphor of the holly bush to mirror Christ's birth, life and death? Were they borrowing ideas from pagan tree worship rituals many centuries older than Christianity itself?

These mysterious and beautiful carols should be pondered anew by each generation. Preserving them is as vital as preserving ancient buildings or paintings – and a lot cheaper. All we have to do is be a little more adventurous about what we sing every Christmas. *O Little Town of Bethlehem* won't wither away if you give it a miss this year. But other wonderful carols are already slipping from obscurity to oblivion, and Christmas becomes that little bit blander with each disappearance.

Richard Morrison is chief music critic and a columnist of The Times

In dulci jubilo

When Christopher Gray became director of music at St John's College, Cambridge in 2023, he stepped into a tradition 350 years in the making, as he tells Ashutosh Khandekar

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD CANNON

Change and custom: the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge embraces the future while protecting its heritage

DREW GURIAN/MASTERCLASS.COM, GETTY

High spirits:
St John's College Choir now welcomes both boy and girl choristers to its ranks

'What matters most is that every singer is communicating the story of the music'

When Christopher Gray took on the role of director of music at St John's College, Cambridge, he inherited more than a prestigious choir: he stepped into a 350-year legacy. Following the long and respected tenure of Andrew Nethsingha, who was at the helm of St John's Choir for 15 years, Gray arrived in April 2023 to find a choral scene still finding its voice after the pandemic.

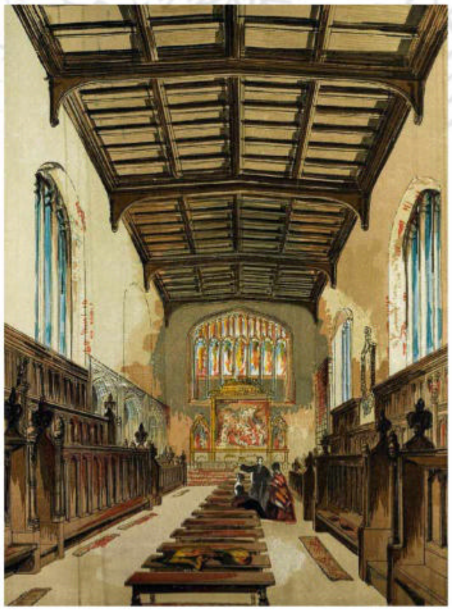
'Covid cast a long shadow,' Gray reflects as we settle into his comfortable study in a corner of the historic Cambridge college. 'There was a whole generation of singers – both choristers and students – who had crucial formative years interrupted.' During his time as director of music at Truro Cathedral, Gray had already weathered the complex task of rebuilding a musical institution that had lost its momentum. 'I think both Andrew and I did the heavy lifting in our respective places, getting things back on track,' he says. 'You only have the young choristers for five years. Take out a key year or two – as Covid did – and rebuilding is tricky. The effects aren't just short-term.'

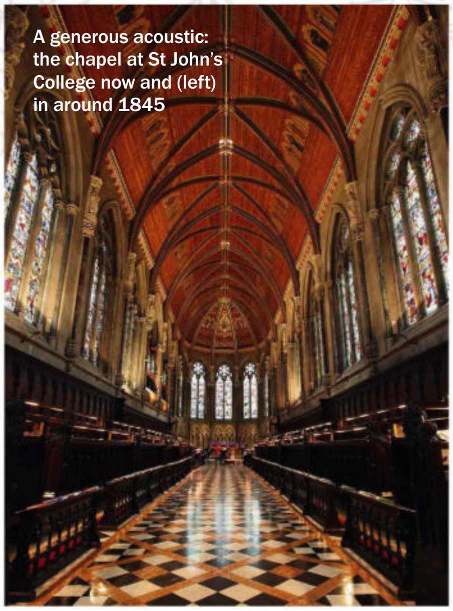
Gray arrived at St John's after an altogether transformative period in the choir's history. Nethsingha had raised the choir's musical reputation by commissioning prominent composers and initiating a groundbreaking series of recordings. He also oversaw a succession of significant reforms – introducing girl trebles and women altos, and smoothing the way for St John's Choir School's independence from the College. 'I was lucky,' Gray notes. 'Those changes were huge. But they were done with care.'

It wasn't the first time Gray had stepped into Nethsingha's shoes. 'I was Andrew's assistant in Truro in 2000. Then, after Robert Sharpe's time as director of music there, I took over fully in 2008.' Their connection is both longstanding and personal: Gray is godfather to one of Nethsingha's children. 'So, there is a sense of continuity,' he says, 'but I don't think anyone would see me as a "Nethsingha clone". I bring my own energy to the table.'

Tradition runs deep at St John's. The choir was founded in the 1670s, and Gray is clear-eyed about the need for stewardship rather than reinvention. 'I didn't want to come in and make St John's sound like Truro, or like anything else. I love the unique identity of this choir and my job is to keep that tradition alive.'

Today, that tradition has expanded to include both boys and girls on the top line – something Gray says is no longer controversial. 'I rarely hear complaints. We're good at staying connected with





A generous acoustic: the chapel at St John's College now and (left) in around 1845

RICHARD CANNON, HARRISON & HARRISON LTD, GETTY

alumni, many of whom return for reunions. I had dinner with some from the 1960s recently, and they were delighted with the sound of the choir today. That's the test. I don't think the difference is worse or better: it's just different, and to be celebrated. You can't stand still in these things, but you always have to think about what people want to listen to. Our singers take part in this juggling act every day.'

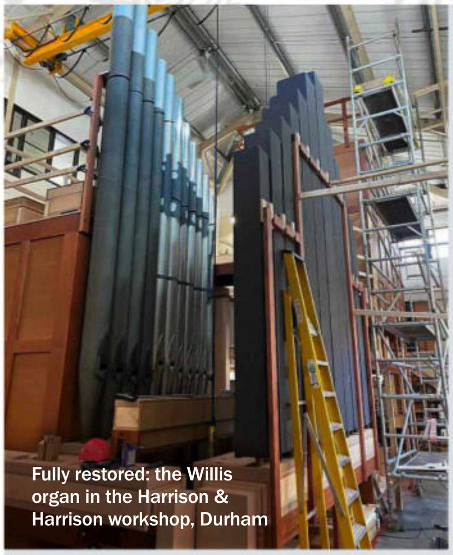
Part of what defines the St John's sound, he explains, lies in the very fabric of the chapel itself. 'It's simple really: our chapel is not small, but it's not big like a cathedral. So we can have a huge dynamic range. In a lot of bigger buildings, if the choir sings below a certain volume, it's just inaudible. But we can sing at a sparkling *pianissimo* and it'll be perfectly audible in every part of the chapel and antechapel. The building also takes vibrant, large-scale singing as well. So the full range is open to us.' There are other factors that shape the sound too, Gray adds: 'Our chapel doesn't have a very long echo, but it's a warm, generous acoustic that seems to envelop the choral sound without obscuring the details.'

For Gray, the roots of this 'choral sound' lie in the choices made while auditioning young choristers. 'Yes, we listen for colour and tone, but I'm not too hung up on how voices blend. It's the personality I'm after – that emotional connection. I recently heard a boy of only about seven or eight who just lived the music as he sang. It was all over his face.' For Gray, authenticity trumps perfection. 'Blend is part of it, but what matters most is that every singer is telling the story of the music. You don't get people to smile by telling them how to move their cheeks – you tell them a joke! Same with music. Being able to communicate the feelings that inspire the music opens up expressive possibilities.'

Given the choir's central role in Cambridge's liturgical life, spirituality and theological understanding are a natural part of its musical mission. 'There are people of many faiths – and none – in the choir,' Gray explains. 'But sincerity matters. Like an actor, you have to fully inhabit the part. If you can empathise with the spiritual or religious dimensions of what we're singing, it deepens the performance.' The choir often discusses texts and their theological implications in rehearsal. 'Take the Magnificat — sung every day in Evensong. The words are the same, expressing the Virgin Mary's delight in expecting a child. But each composer hears them differently. One might see Mary's song as joyful and unburdened; another might hear depth and awe, or mystery, even apprehension. It provides a case study in text painting.'

These interpretive layers, he says, are part of what make the choir's work feel alive. 'You see it in the choristers' faces as well. Expression is hard to fake. It needs to get into the eyes, not just the voice. On our best days, we do that very well. Of course, sometimes they're tired – we sing seven services a week. I can't say the choir brings unflagging energy to every single crotchet we sing, but we certainly aspire to it!'

Gray is passionate about emotional honesty in music – something, he freely admits, that is 'not always openly



Fully restored: the Willis organ in the Harrison & Harrison workshop, Durham

Pulling out all the stops

A new organ for St John's

Change is in the air at St John's College, Cambridge – quite literally. Next year, the chapel will welcome a newly restored four-manual organ by Henry Willis (pictured left).

'The Mander & Sons organ we've had since 1994 has become increasingly unreliable,' explains Christopher Gray. Rather than undertake a costly rebuild, the college decided to seize an opportunity. 'We were offered a magnificent Father Willis instrument, from roughly the same era as the famous organs at Truro, Salisbury and Hereford cathedrals. Willis just got it right – his instruments have an unmistakable grandeur and warmth.'

The Father Willis organ was initially housed in the Hampstead Conservatoire before being moved to St Peter's Church in Brighton in 1910. Former director of music Andrew Nethsingha worked closely with organ consultant William McVicker, and in 2022 the organ was dismantled and stored by the renowned firm of organ builders Harrison & Harrison in preparation for its move to Cambridge. The firm has since revoiced the pipes, rebuilt the action, and undone earlier pitch alterations to bring the instrument back to its original integrity. The result, says Gray, will be 'a thoroughbred Willis'.

Finding the right organ for St John's was never going to be simple, admits Gray. 'You want versatility. It needs to fill the chapel, support congregational hymns, inspire the choir, and do justice to Bach and Elgar – without seeming to be a jack of all trades.' The organ will be inaugurated in May 2026.

Emotional spectrum: St John's choristers are encouraged to convey grief and fear as well as compassion and hope

discussed in ecclesiastical settings'. His debut recording with the choir, *Lament and Liberation*, released earlier this year, is a bold statement of that conviction. The album explores the themes of displacement, tyranny, resilience and faith – subjects that are as contemporary as they are scriptural.

'We were dealing with quite weighty texts,' Gray explains. 'Joanna Marsh's *Echoes in Time* describes the Holy Family as refugees, with Mary and Joseph fleeing from persecution and Herod as a dictator. James MacMillan's *Cantos Sagrados* is a powerful response to political oppression in South America in the 1970s and '80s. These composers don't shy away from discomfort. That's what drew me to them. There's a danger that church music becomes too safe – too beautiful, perhaps, but not truthful. What *Lament and Liberation* tries to do is give space to the full emotional spectrum: fear, grief, outrage, compassion, hope. You can be shocked, angry, moved – and once those emotions are part of your palette, you start to find them in less overtly dramatic texts as well.'

'There's a danger that church music becomes too beautiful, but not truthful'

For Gray, this kind of repertoire is not about making political statements, but about broadening the visceral, expressive reach of sacred music. 'We have to be sensitive about what's appropriate for a choir like ours to say,' he adds. 'But if the readings, the prayers, the sermons all touch on human vulnerability or injustice, then it's natural that the music should respond. These composers give us a way of doing that – to make those connections without preaching.'

His own upbringing in Northern Ireland has inevitably shaped his sensitivity to the intersection of politics, religion and identity. 'When you grow up with something, it becomes strangely normalised. Armed police, checkpoints, bombs – it was just life.' He acknowledges the tribal tensions that once gripped the region – Protestantism tied to Unionism, Catholicism to Republicanism – while pointing out that theological differences were rarely the true cause of violence. 'Still, it gives you a particular lens to view everything else through.'

He was already thoroughly familiar with Anglican liturgy before moving to England at 18 to take up the organ scholarship at Pembroke College, Cambridge, studying organ with David Sanger and Nicolas Kynaston. 'I was lucky enough in my teens to be assistant organist at St George's Church in Belfast, with its fine choral tradition. It's a Church of Ireland parish, so part of the Anglican Communion. Evensong was part of the ritual, and it was quite high church – incense and all that – which caused some discussion given the sensitivities in Northern Ireland. But the services were part of a tradition, and not unlike what we do here at St John's.'

Voices old and new: music director Christopher Gray; (below) Poulenc and Sally Beamish both feature on the new album *O Holy Night*

THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S CAMBRIDGE
O HOLY NIGHT
GRAY

Recording plays a significant role in the life of the choir, with more than 100 recordings to its name since the first St John's release in 1959. In 2016, it launched its own record label, in conjunction with Signum Classics. In recent years, commissioning new work from both established and emerging composers has been a core part of the recording philosophy. 'It feels like a good fit for a place where an influx of youthful minds renews our community every year.' At the same time, he's committed to offering choral repertoire of every sort: 'It's eclectic. We borrow Mass settings from Mozart and Haydn, and have our own diet of Byrd, Tallis, Palestrina, Victoria and plainchant. That will always be a bedrock.'

Following the gritty, contemporary thrust of *Lament and Liberation*, Gray's second recording for the St John's/Signum label is quite different: a Christmas album entitled *O Holy Night*. For Gray, the line-up captures something essential about the choir, blending centuries of tradition with a nod to the present. 'Christmas is a time when people want familiarity,' he says, 'so we've included those carols that feel like home.' Alongside well-loved classics including *O Holy Night*, *The Sussex Carol* and Pearsall's double-choir setting of

RICHARD CANNON, PABLO STRONG, SARAH HICKSON, GETTY

Treble top: former St John's chorister Iestyn Davies

Life beyond the stalls

Some notable St John's alumni

What do St John's choristers do when they have left the choir? In many instances, they simply keep on singing. Take, for example, **Simon Keenlyside** who, after his time as a treble came to an end in the early 1970s, returned to St John's a few years later as an undergraduate choral scholar, singing bass. And after that, he went on to launch what has become a stellar career as an operatic baritone.

A similar route was taken by **Iestyn Davies**, who has followed his chorister and then choral scholar days by becoming one of today's best-known opera countertenors. In his second spell with the choir in the late 1990s, Davies would have come across treble **Julian Gregory** who, in 2009, also chose to return as an undergraduate choral scholar. Today, Gregory earns his crust touring the world as the tenor of the King's Singers.

And in the course of their operatic activities, Keenlyside and Davies may well have crossed paths with **David Pountney**. A St John's chorister in the mid-1950s, Pountney has gone on to enjoy acclaim as one of today's leading opera directors, with productions gracing the big stages in venues spreading from the UK to the US, Austria to Australia.

There is, of course, also life outside music, and St John's ex-choristers have earned fame here too. These include **Ben Gummer**, who served as Conservative MP for Ipswich from 2010-17, and actor **Clive Mantle**, who British TV viewers may best remember as the genial doctor Mike Barratt in the BBC series *Casualty* and *Holby City* in the 1990s.

Highly motivated team: choristers are part of a special community; (left) Gray conducts Evensong

In dulci jubilo, there are works by Poulenc and Howells, and contemporary pieces including *Peace on Earth* by Master of the King's Music Errollyn Wallen, alongside Sally Beamish's *In the Stillness*, Jonathan Dove's *The Three Kings*, Becky McGlade's *In the Bleak Midwinter* and Tamsin Jones's *Noel: Verbum caro factum est*, all chosen as works that bring a new emotional spark to Christmas worship. Audiences can also sample the delights of this seasonal collection in a concert setting, when the choir performs the carols in Wigmore Hall at a lunchtime concert on 15 December.

The festive period in St John's College has a distinctive rhythm, culminating in the Advent Carol Service, a much-loved tradition broadcast on BBC Radio 3 almost every year since 1981. Once term ends and the college empties, the choristers are free over Christmas – unlike their neighbours at King's College and their cathedral choir counterparts who stay on until Christmas Day. For St John's choristers, this is the time for touring. In recent years they have performed in Europe's great concert halls, from the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg to the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and Munich's Prinzregententheater.

Singing in concert halls, Gray notes, differs significantly from services. 'You're performing rather than worshipping. In chapel, we're barely aware of the "public", but on tour, we're singing to big audiences, and you've got up to 2,000 eyes on you. The trick is to keep things sounding natural rather than self-conscious.'

> 'My task is to nurture the choir, and to let it grow with integrity'

Given the high levels of commitment and the immersive nature of choral life, Gray admits that recruiting new generations of young singers is becoming ever more challenging. 'The erosion of music education in schools means that the talent pool is dwindling, especially from the state sector.' However, he still feels that the educational experience on offer to St John's choristers – including travel, recordings and performing music at the highest professional level – is compelling. 'Parents do seek out St John's. They want their child to be part of this very special, highly motivated community. We were just in America for 15 days, in Michigan, Texas and Tennessee. For a 10 year-old – or at any age, for that matter – it's an extraordinary life!'

Gray's own musical life began not at a choir school, but at Bangor Grammar School in Northern Ireland. 'My head of music, Ian Hunter, was a fan of St John's and Cambridge choirs. He'd go to evensongs in England and bring back ideas. He ran a choir that gave me opportunities to sing in places like St Paul's and Westminster Abbey. So yes, the St John's tradition was implanted early.'

As he settles into the centuries-old rhythms of life in Cambridge and St John's, Gray shows no urgency to impose change for its own sake. 'The choir already has a compelling musical identity. My job is to nurture it, let it grow with integrity, and ensure that every voice – literal and metaphorical – feels it has a place in a modern, thoughtful and enlightened community.'

RICHARD CANNON

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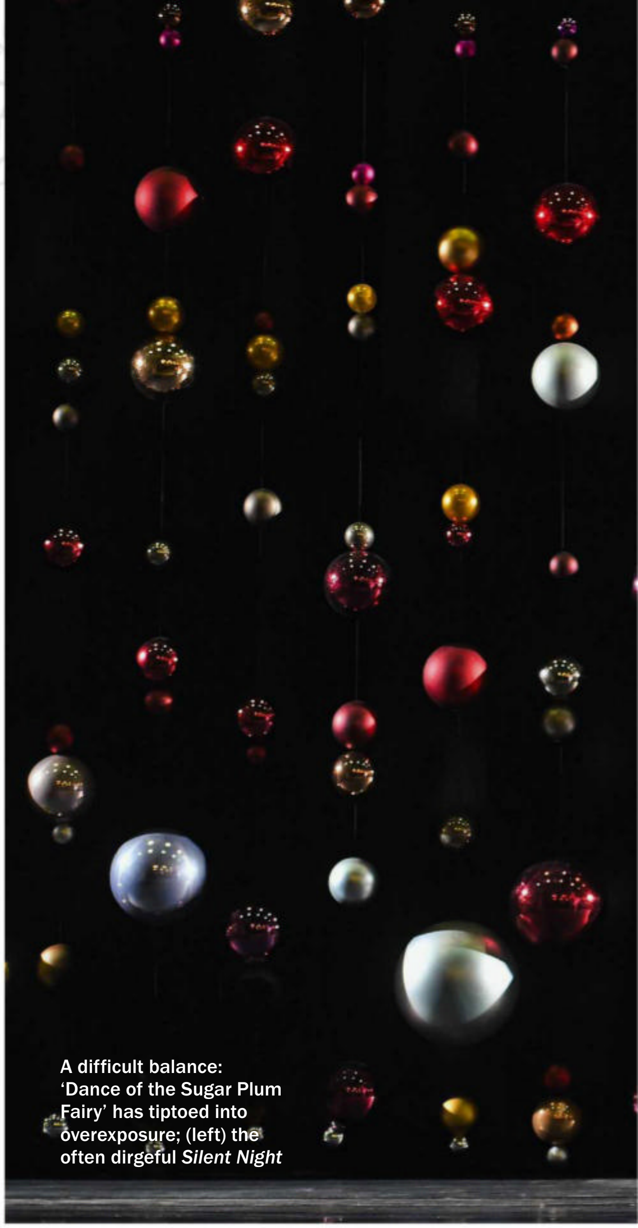
Jingle hell!

As the Christmas season approaches, the *BBC Music Magazine* team share the festive tunes that make our hearts sink



A difficult balance: 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' has tiptoed into overexposure; (left) the often dirgeful *Silent Night*

Silent Night
Mother and Child, Holy Infant so Tender and Mild...

> It may be one of the most popular carols of all time, but *Silent Night* has spoiled the anticipatory energy of many a Christmas carol service

At *BBC Music Magazine* we're rather fond of Christmas... for the fizz and food, family and fun. But especially, of course, for the music. Even the most withering Scrooge must admit that festive hymns and carols are a prime reason to cherish the season of goodwill. Be they sacred or secular, they're comforting and familiar, an important annual ritual, and often very well composed.

Yet one man's stuffing is another man's sprout, and no matter how much your heart may be lifted by the sound of *Deck the Halls*, for another, seemingly reasonable person, even the first few notes of that much-loved carol can be enough to cause irritation, fury and the desire to hibernate until the start of a new year.

So, we've put together a list of the Christmas music we'd rather do without. Needless to say, we're not making any statement about the quality of the works below – and if your favourite festive tune should turn up in the following pages, don't take it to heart. But at a time of relentless sparkle and (occasionally enforced) joy, a little grumble never hurt anyone...

Arbeau/Ratcliffe Woodward
Ding Dong! Merrily on high

Music mattered to the Reverend George Ratcliffe Woodward. In a photograph taken outside the Old Vicarage in the Norfolk village of Little Walsingham, the Anglican cleric plays the part of the eccentric parson to perfection. Here stands a Victorian gentleman, old beyond his years, playing a euphonium. Perhaps he's blasting out *Ding Dong! Merrily on high*, the ancient French dance tune which he converted into a carol by adding verses 'riv'n' with toe-curling archaisms.

Woodward's 'swungen' bells and 'sungen' chants of 'Io, io, io' ('Ee-oh, ee-oh, ee-oh', if you're posh, 'Eye-oh, eye-oh, eye-oh', if you're not) are rivalled in the irritation stakes by the carol's 'Gloria' refrain. My yuletide nightmares feature a loop track of its seemingly endless melody, more penitential flagellation than joyful acclamation. And then there's the unbreakable emotional restraint that *Ding Dong!* all too often forces upon choristers, preventing them from turning the expression dial to peak ecstasy.

Andrew Stewart

Gruber/Mohr *Silent Night*

It may be one of the most popular carols of all time – and declared intangible cultural heritage in 2011 by UNESCO, no less – but *Silent Night*, or rather *Stille Nacht* in the original German, has spoiled the anticipatory energy of many a Christmas carol service. Almost without

Blowing merrily: Rev. George Ratcliffe Woodward shows off his euphonium

ALAMY, GETTY

fail, its difficult 7th leap in the third bar pulls the whole carol down to earth with a bang, as congregations struggle to rise to the heights of 'All is calm', instead landing just under the note with infuriating predictability. And more so, its repetitive falling melodic pattern, and slow – all too often, dragging – pace do it no favours.

Of course, lovely arrangements of *Silent Night* have been sung beautifully by many a professional cathedral and chapel choir – but for contemplative Christmas vibes, there are better, more musically rewarding examples. Try *In the Bleak Midwinter* in either the Darke or Holst versions for a more satisfying experience. *Charlotte Smith*

JS Bach *Christmas Oratorio*

I won't rush to buy tickets for Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* this December. When my choir programmed it last year there were shouts of joy. 'Oh I love the *Christmas Oratorio*!' But, I wanted to ask them, 'Have you really listened to it all

Tea, Three Kings?: (right) after plodding through moor and mountain, the monarchs enjoy a well-deserved cuppa; (below) Mozart, whose 'Sleigh Ride' lumbers predictably

the way through? Or are you just remembering that first, glorious chorus "Jauchzet, frohlocket"? I challenge you to name any other chorus... because there aren't many.'

Bach wrote the oratorio in 1734 (see p14) as six cantatas to be performed on separate days, from Christmas Day to Epiphany. It is nearly three hours long, so to perform it in concert you're faced with cutting out whole parts or cherry-picking the arias and leaving enough choruses to satisfy the choir. I love the soprano aria with oboe and ghostly alto echo, and trumpets give everything a Christmassy shine, but it's not enough to make me want to hear it often.
Amanda Holloway

Handel *Messiah*

I'll admit I'm not much of a Scrooge. I love mangling the glorias in *Ding! dong! merrily on high*, and the season just isn't the same without a stirring *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* descant. But it turns out I am a festive pedant, because the one piece, much as I love it, that I could live without at Christmas is Handel's *Messiah*. Yes, it's become a great choral society tradition to give seasonal performances of this oratorio. Sure, I'll concede that the 'Hallelujah Chorus' adds an uplifting injection of energy to any festive playlist or programme. But doesn't hearing it every single year feel boringly predictable?

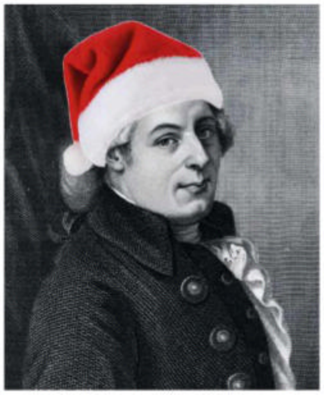
And, to return to the pedantry, Handel didn't have presents in mind when he wrote it in 1741. *Messiah* was composed, at lightning pace, for Easter, and first performed just after. The 'Hallelujah Chorus' is in praise of the Resurrection. Why not restore it to its rightful place in the calendar and let a contemporary composer gives us a fresh work for Christmas?
Rebecca Franks

Hopkins Jr *We Three Kings of Orient Are*

There are many joys to a traditional school carol service – candlelight, the scent of pine and that first angelic solo of *Once in Royal.* But nothing kills festive cheer faster than *We Three Kings.*

One moment we're ding-donging merrily on high; the next, trudging across a musical desert, muttering balefully about 'field and fountain, moor and mountain'. The tune plods along like a weary camel, the English mangled like badly translated biblical apocrypha. And those gifts! Gold: surely a bit bling for a humble manger? Frankincense: basically, a scented candle. Myrrh: embalming fluid – yuck! Naturally, I always got the 'sorrowing, sighing, bleeding and dying' verse. Guaranteed to dampen Christmas cheer. By the end, even the vicar would look desperate, glancing longingly at the mulled wine in the vestry. So, give me a rousing *Hark! The Herald* any day – Christmas deserves gusto, not myrrh and misery.
Ashutosh Khandekar

GETTY



> 'Undeniably amiable, Mozart's 'Sleigh Ride' is as hackneyed as those pale-imitation German Christmas markets that sprout across the UK for the festive season'

Leontovych/Wilhousky *Carol of the Bells*

Some things are just unaccountably irritating, and for me *Carol of the Bells* – No. 3 (!!) on a recent list of the Nation's Favourite Carols – is one of them. *Rolling Stone* magazine memorably defines *Bells* as 'four notes repeated over and over *and over* until the middle of January', opining that 'nearly any version of this faux-classical glee-club cheese log is torture'. Indeed it is.

And here's the difficulty – there are just so many rip-offs and re-arrangements of the carol's drip-drip, ear-worm melody to be tortured by. How about LeAnn Rimes's mind-numbingly metronomic plough-through? Or Family Force 5's grunge annihilation? Or, worst of all, Trans-Siberian Orchestra's heavy metal mash-up, with shredding guitars and boom-bang percussion? You can't blame Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych. He penned the original choral piece from which *Bells* later developed. But if only he had realised the mayhem he was unleashing....
Terry Blain

Mendelssohn *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

From the grandest cathedral to the diddiest

Unseasonal Handel: audience members sing at the 'Bar room Messiah', Portland, Oregon, 2017

village church, wherever there's a carol service you can guarantee that this monster will be lurking, ready to inflict its unique brand of pain. It's not the hymn itself I object to – in fact, I quite like it – but rather the torture of having to sing it. In short, unless you're a testosterone-lite, high-voiced tenor, Ds above middle C do not sit comfortably, so when three appear in the first line alone, followed by a further seven over the next two lines, things are already hard work.

But worse is to come as, in the refrain, we're then shoved even higher up to an E – six of them in all. Of course, if you are in the choir, you can happily duck below to sing Mendelssohn's wonderful harmonies and only worry about the Trial by Repeated High Notes when the sopranos show off their fancy descant in Verse 4. However, as I'm inevitably in the congregation, I have no alternative but to face the ordeal four times over. By the end, my voice is in pieces.
Jeremy Pound

Mozart *Three German Dances, K605* – 'The Sleigh Ride'

There's a toe-curling moment in Miloš Forman's film adaptation of Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*. The young Mozart is greeted at the Viennese Court with a keyboard march composed for the occasion by Salieri and performed by the hapless Emperor. After a few pleasantries, Wolfgang can't help himself and shreds Salieri's efforts with a blistering lesson in one-upmanship.

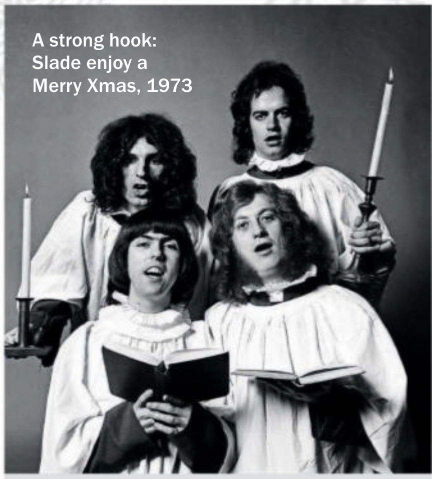
Yet when it comes to that perennial Christmas favourite, Mozart's 'Sleigh Ride', the words 'pot and kettle' spring to mind. A seasonal stocking-filler, its ho-hum harmonic predictability betrays a bastion of banality to rival Salieri's four-square 'welcome'.

A bland central section compounds the tedium, though a dusting of sleighbells (plus a pair of post horns) bestows a certain wintry cheer – albeit despite the customary penny-pinching omission of five differently-tuned bells as requested in the score. Undeniably amiable, K605/3 is nonetheless as hackneyed as those pale-imitation German Christmas markets that sprout across the UK. Bah humbug, say I.
Paul Riley

Tchaikovsky *The Nutcracker*

While certain melodies inspire greatness, others simply grate. There is a point at which familiarity tips into overexposure and, for me, *The Nutcracker* has reached this unfortunate conclusion. The fault does not lie with Tchaikovsky, who packed the festive ballet with hummable tunes. Rather, it is the over-use of the 'Sugar Plum Fairy' motif in adverts, which in recent years has accompanied a girls' night out at Candyland (Baileys), Santa trying to break into hotel rooms (Airbnb) and dads dancing in Christmas jumpers (Sainsbury's). Did we learn nothing from Cadbury's 'everyone's a fruit and nutcase' desecration of 'Danse des mirlitons'?

'I hope I never hear that God-awful *Nutcracker* music again,' opines Homer Simpson, shortly before a medley cast to the Act 1 No. 2 March. But *The Nutcracker* has always been ripe


A strong hook: Slade enjoy a Merry Xmas, 1973

Go fourth in piece

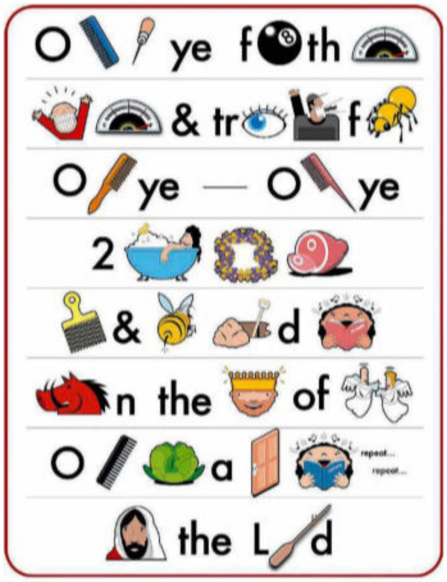
The perfect carol start

Here's a little festive teaser for you. What do *Away in a manger*, *I Saw Three Ships*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, *We Wish You A Merry Christmas*, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, *The 12 Days of Christmas*, *This is the Truth Sent from Above* and The Pogues' 'Fairytale of New York' have in common?

Answer: they all begin the same way! Or, to put it in music theory terms, they start with an upward interval of a perfect fourth from the dominant to the tonic. Also add to the list *Once in Royal David's City* and the chorus to Slade's 'Merry Xmas Everybody', which effectively do the same, but with one and two steps respectively on the way up to the tonic.

Consulting a cluster of well-known choral experts, *BBC Music* was hoping to find some long-held tradition that provides a reason why this is so often the case, but we drew a bit of a blank. Instead, it is probably more to do with ease of singing. 'Starting a melody with what is in essence a perfect cadence establishes everything one needs musically, but it does seem coincidental that so many Christmas carols begin that way,' says one expert. 'Carols are a bit like jingles/calling cards,' adds another. 'and in that genre you need to basically have a strong hook right at the start.'

Too much, my love!: singer Nanette Fabray parodies *The Twelve Days of Christmas* on US show *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, 1967



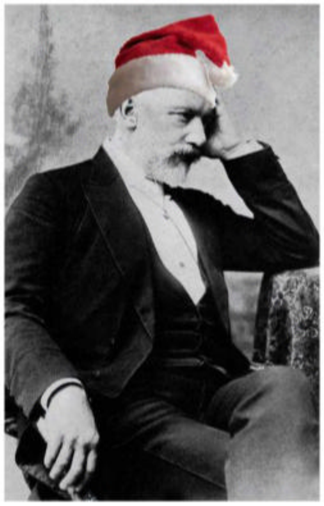
Awkward fit: (above) the tricky words of *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, represented as pictograms; (below) *Nutcracker* composer Tchaikovsky is unimpressed

for reinvention: the ballet itself stems from the shorter *Nutcracker Suite*, and has been arranged by Grainger, Pletnev – and many more.
Claire Jackson

Traditional
The Twelve Days of Christmas

Some may say *The Twelve Days of Christmas* is the perfect festive song. It is famously repetitive, ideal for congregational singing and offers the opportunity for silly noises and inventive choreography. It has an interesting history, too, the 'twelve days' referring to the period between Christmas Day and Epiphany, traditionally celebrated in Europe with religious feasting.

But forgive me for being the Grinch; after singing it annually in choir for over a decade, the charm has worn thin. Not only does the song's relentless structure become a test of endurance, I can't get out of my head the poor person who is buried under an avalanche of birds, dancers, drummers and dairy products by the end of the song. Not to mention the other questions... Where did my 'true love' find 30 'lords a-leaping'? And what are the swans swimming in – do I get a free lake too? The only saving grace is that you could earn some money from those 40 gold rings. Yes, the song has charm, but as an expression of holiday love, it's far too stressful.
Miranda Bardsley



> 'The fault does not lie with Tchaikovsky, who packed *The Nutcracker* with hummable tunes. Rather, it is the over-use of the 'Sugar Plum Fairy' motif in adverts'

Traditional
We Wish You a Merry Christmas

My beef with *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* is not that it's schmaltzy, or over-familiar, or impossible to sing. It's just a bit... boring. When I hear *O Little Town of Bethlehem* or *In the Bleak Midwinter*, I can close my eyes and be transported to Midnight Mass. The flickering candlelight, the singers' breath in the cold cathedral air: those hymns conjure all this.

With this one, though, I am not transported anywhere. I think it's partly the endless repetition of that melody and (within each verse) the same amiable but forgettable lyrics. You 'wish me a Merry Christmas', do you? Great, thanks. And you. No, the truth is that singing 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas' doesn't bring me any of that nourishing festive warmth that other carols provide. Instead, all that repetition and banality feels like the musical equivalent of data entry.
Steve Wright

Wade *O Come, All Ye Faithful*

Carol fans seem to be divided into *Hark* haters and *Faithful* haters, and I'm firmly in the latter camp. Mainly because of the words, which in some verses fit so awkwardly. Everyone in a singalong concert has different ideas about whether you sing 'Go-od of Go-od' or 'God o-of Go-od' in verse 2, and as for 'Offer him incense, gold and myrrh' in the full seven-verse version... most of us have given up by then. Then there's the passing note that anyone who hasn't had it beaten out of them in a good church choir puts into the last bar of each verse. And the descant that middle-aged women who remember it from school days insist on singing even though they can no longer produce a pleasing top G.

But it is redeemed of course by THE CHORD, so loved by church musicians that it even has its own commercially-available T-shirt – the 'Word of the Father' climax of David Willcocks's setting of verse 7, which purists only sing on Christmas Day. *Faithful* should be banned until then.
Clare Stevens

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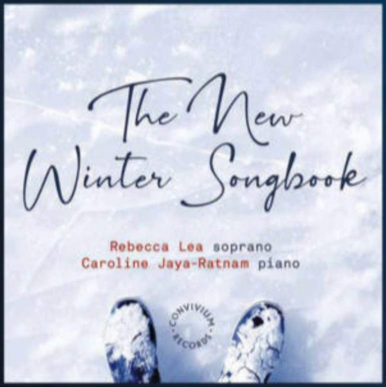
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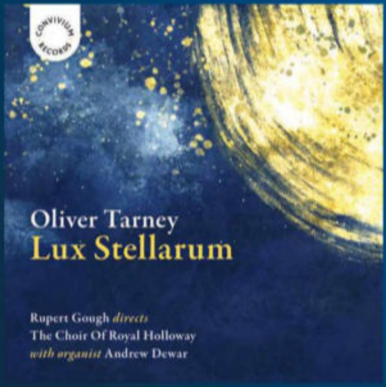
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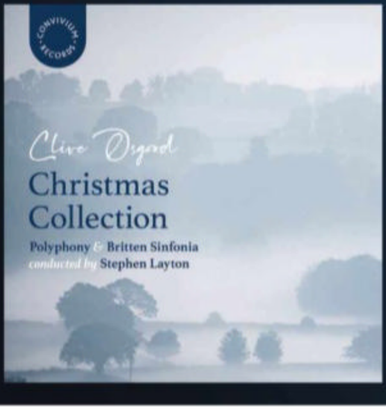
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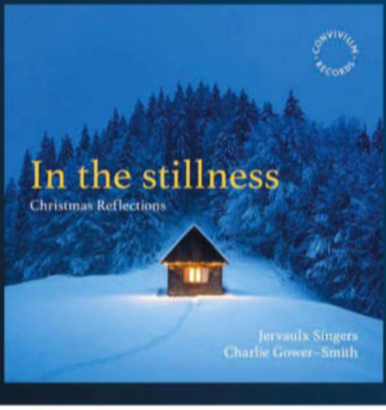
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Kermitted performance: (opposite, clockwise) tenor Andrea Bocelli sings with the Muppets on the *Jay Leno Show*, 2009; Louis Armstrong triggers a Claus in his contract, 1953; tenor Lauritz Melchior meets polio victims, 1949; (above) Renée Fleming dreams of a White House Christmas with US presidents Bill Clinton, 1999, and Barack Obama (plus violinist Joshua Bell and singer Mariah Carey), 2013; (right) Boston Pops conductor Keith Lockhart is rattled by mayor Thomas Menino, 2010; (left) Charlotte Church displays her angelic voice on the *Jay Leno Show*, 1999; (below) treble-turned-baritone Aled Jones is squawking in the air, 2016; (below right) composer Robert Stolz, soprano Anneliese Rothenberger and baritone Hermann Prey, 1971

GETTY

In good faith

Composer Roxanna Panufnik and writer Jessica Duchen tell Amanda Holloway how they have joined forces for a new choral work that looks well beyond Christmas for its festive celebrations

In 2014, the writer Jessica Duchen came to Roxanna Panufnik with the idea for an 'oratorio' based on winter festivals of Light as celebrated by different world faiths. The image of the Aurora Borealis, a natural phenomenon with similar impact, would be a unifying secular element. 'We'd been talking about building musical bridges between faiths, and I leapt at it,' says Panufnik, who has also written works using a combination of Christian, Jewish and Islamic chant in *Songs of Darkness, Dreams of Light* in 2018, and in the violin concerto *Abraham*, rewritten for the World Orchestra for Peace as *Three Paths to Peace* and performed in Jerusalem and the BBC Proms.

'Music goes straight to the heart,' explains Panufnik, as we talk about the new work in her little garden studio. 'These are universal emotions and we really need to be reminded of that. Someone in Oslo is going to feel that as much as somebody in Oman, for instance.'

Though this particular project had obvious global appeal, it took years before a commission came through: one potential lead foundered because of a change in orchestra personnel, another because of a devastating wildfire in Oregon. Finally, in 2023 Panufnik took it to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), who saw the potential to involve the vibrant multifaith communities in their home city. She also contacted the Northern Lights Festival in Norway and the Arctic Philharmonic became one of the co-commissioners, while the Royal Choral Society offered a London premiere.

The research involved has been enormous. 'Ten years we worked on it, talking to faith consultants and musicians, before I put pen to paper,' says Panufnik. A practising Catholic, she

GETTY, HANNAH FATHERS/CBSO

Glowing endorsement: Aurora Borealis is at the heart of Roxanna Panufnik's new choral work; (right) Panufnik's father, Andrzej; (above right) celebrating Diwali in Guwahati, India; (below) Panufnik with the CBSO Youth and Children's Choruses, 2023

has always been open to other faiths: 'I've read the Holy Koran, the Hindu Bhagavad Gita and all the poems from the Guru Granth Sahib, the main Sikh religious scripture. *Aurora: Faith in Harmony* comes from a place which is not trying to emulate anything; it's trying to find what we have in common. In fact, I read the Koran twice as I just marvelled at all the things that we share. It's extraordinary – nobody talks about them.'

> 'The most important thing about this is emphasising what our different faiths share'

There's something of a family tradition here. Roxanna's father, the distinguished Polish composer Andrzej Panufnik (see p60), had been deeply affected by the aftermath of World War II. He dreamt of using his music to heal divisions between nations and in 1950, after a visit to the Soviet Union, wrote a *Symphony of Peace*. In 1963 he wrote the *Universal Prayer*, which he hoped would be performed by a choir with singers of 'all nationalities, beliefs and races'. He would have been delighted to see how the 270 singers of the CBSO's three choruses giving the premiere of *Aurora* reflect the diversity of modern-day Birmingham.

Roxanna has also written a version for chamber orchestra and smaller choir, and one for piano and unison voices so the piece can be taken out of the concert hall and into schools. 'I've been fundraising for a recording to be made of the chorus doing the unison version, and piano part on its own. Places that don't have access to a pianist can sing along with the recording,' she says. The music of *Aurora* is beguiling, full of tangy harmonies and interesting rhythms, and accessible to all kinds of audiences. 'That's the point of it – it's for everybody to listen to and to perform. The most important thing about this is emphasising what all our different faiths share and getting that message across.'

Aurora is divided into six movements, each with a strophic text by Jessica Duchen that reflects elements of a major faith or festival. The first is a joyful Christmas carol inspired by the ancient Latin plainchant 'Ave Maris Stella' and embellished by church bells. It has a familiar carol shape that builds from quiet wonder at the birth of Christ to a vision of hope offered by the bright Christmas star. Then comes Milad un Nabi, the festival marking the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the words loosely based on poetry by the 11th-century Sanhaji Sufi Muslim poet Al-Busiri. 'A wonderful Sufi *daf* player, Khaled Hakim, who helped me with the drum rhythm in my earlier piece *Songs of Darkness*, created daf rhythms inspired by Sufi rhythms specially for this piece,' says Panufnik.

For Diwali she chose to cover the Sikh, Jain and Hindu traditions in one movement – quite a challenge for a four-minute section. 'The scales or the modes of the ragas that Sikhs or Jains or Hindus would use in that particular

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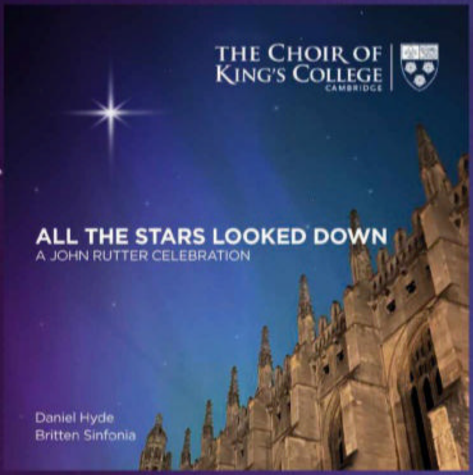
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Let there be light: (left) the central shamash of the Hanukkah menorah is lit on the first night of the eight-day Jewish festival; (below) Buddhist monks play Tibetan Cymbals and drums at the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery

context are different,' she says. Listening to the Jain verse on her computer, you can feel the gentle propulsion and the way the verse builds in intensity, hypnotic rhythms punctuated by tinkling bells like tiny sparklers. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah comes next, and Roxanna, who is half-Jewish on her mother's side, has set the text in a Jewish mode but with mainly minor harmonies. It sounds delightful, but the computer simulation is obviously nothing like the real thing. 'There's so much you're not hearing,' says Roxanna. 'The colour and the warmth and the force of the orchestra are missing. The live performance will be fabulous.'

Perhaps the least familiar music is that of the Tibetan Buddhists. 'When we found the Tibetan Buddhist Gaden Ngamchoe festival, also known as the Butter Lamp Festival, it just fitted so beautifully,' says Panufnik. She emailed the Office of Tibet in London and they were surprised, but excited. 'They said, "This is exactly what the Dalai Lama wants, for all faiths to come together and celebrate the things we have in common".' For musical guidance, they put her in touch with the Tashi Lhunpo monks, who are resident in India. 'All instrumental parts are inspired by the monks' orchestra – there's a bass drum, always with cymbals, and bone trumpets and long horns that speak in a particular rhythm.' The last verse is done as a canon, as Panufnik imagines 'a very bare lonely mountain in Tibet. You can hear the glacial violin harmonics and the longhorn drone bass.'

After an orchestral interlude using ideas from all the different movements, the last movement introduces nature's own festival of light, the Aurora Borealis. The text, written by Duchen, is based on her childhood memory of reading about the Northern Lights and longing to see them. It wasn't until this year when she was visiting Orkney that a local friend, who had heard that conditions were favourable for the Aurora, whisked her up a hill. There in the distance was a curtain of dancing green light. 'It's like faith – the more you try to find the lights, the less likely it is to happen,' says Duchen. 'But then it can take you by surprise.' *Aurora*, incidentally, is not the first time that Panufnik and Duchen have combined their talents – previous collaborations include two successful operas for Garsington Opera, tackling themes such as the trauma of war and the plight of refugees.

So, with such a spread of cultures to represent, is the musical language of *Aurora* essentially Roxanna Panufnik, but with Sikh or Hebrew inflections? 'Yes absolutely,' she replies. 'Particularly harmonically, because basically

GETTY

Leading lights

The festivals in Aurora

As well as Christmas, the Light festivals celebrated in Panufnik's *Aurora* are:

Milad un Nabi Celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the date of Milad un Nabi shifts each year as it is based on the lunar calendar – in the UK in 2025, it fell on ***4-6 September***. Celebrations can range from solemn ritual to processions and feasting.

Diwali Symbolising the victory of Dharma (light/good) over Adharma (darkness/evil), this five-day Hindu, Jain and Sikh festival sees homes and public spaces brightly illuminated and fireworks lit (above). Again, the timing depends on the lunar calendar – in the UK in 2025 it took place on ***18-22 October***.

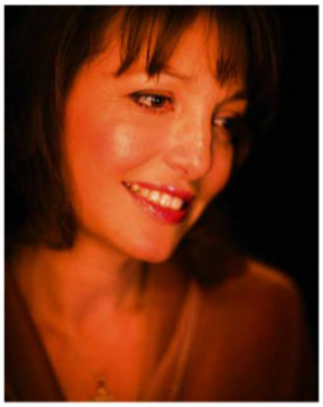
Hanukkah The eight-day Jewish festival falls between the end of November and early January – ***14-22 December*** in 2025. Marking the recapture of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Second Temple during the Maccabean Revolt, its traditions include lighting the Hanukkah menorah.

Gaden Ngamchoe Celebrated on the 25th day of the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar – ***14 December*** in 2025 – Gaden Ngamchoe commemorates the enlightenment of the the Buddhist scholar Je Tsongkhapa and is marked by the lighting of butter lamps in homes and religious buildings.

Coming together: students take part in Eid Milad un Nabi celebrations in Lahore, Pakistan; (below) composer Roxanna Panufnik

my musical language centres around my harmonic progressions and those are what tend to come first.' How would she characterise those progressions? 'Well, they're very reflective of the emotion in whichever words they're under. So it's kind of word painting, but in harmony rather than melody. For instance, the song from Tibet is beautiful, but there's not traditionally a lot of harmonic colour in there. It's more about the melody and the rhythm and the way it's sung, rather than what it's sung over. In the words I felt this great expansive growing harmony that conjures up the nobility, the grandeur of the Tibetan landscape.'

Much as Panufnik would have liked to include traditional instruments such as the Tibetan longhorn or the Sufi daf, it wasn't possible. 'For every traditional instrument we brought in we would have had to lose a member of the orchestra,' she says. 'But we have got a massive range of faiths within the CBSO's adult chorus, youth chorus and children's chorus.' There are some syncopated chants and tricky corners that might challenge a children's choir, but Roxanna has worked through the parts with the choir director Julian Wilkins. 'We spent three or four hours going through it together, making sure everything was as easy for them as possible. Also the melody that's sung will be in the accompaniment, so there is support.' She has kept the choral parts as simple as possible – two soprano lines, alto, tenor and bass, plus optional children's choir. 'There are minimum musical reading skills necessary in the unison version with piano, because I want as many people as possible to perform it. I'm working on making it practical and logistical for everybody.'



> 'Musician to musician, faith leader to faith leader – everyone who's been involved in the creation of this has done so wholeheartedly'

Finally, we come to the elephant in the room – the topic of cultural appropriation. Was it on their mind when writing *Aurora*? 'Yes, of course,' says Panufnik, 'but because we've worked hand in hand with all these different faiths, and our consultants and devotional musicians, all my sources are thoroughly referenced. In fact they are shouted with pride from the rooftops!'

She points out the difference between doing something for commercial gain and making a genuine attempt to honour other people's traditions. 'Musician to musician, faith leader to faith leader – everyone who's been involved in the creation of this has done so wholeheartedly. We're all trying to aim for the same thing, which is a shared celebration of light over darkness.'

No longer do choral societies have to trot out *Messiah*s and *Christmas Oratorio*s in December. Instead they can refresh their repertoire with *Aurora: Faith in Harmony*, a work that illuminates not just one, but five faiths, while celebrating the wonders of the natural world.

'Aurora: Faith in Harmony' is part of 'Satnam Rana presents Bringing the Light' at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, 7 December

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Growing influence: Alex Ho is at the forefront of an expanding group of Chinese composers in the UK; (top right) Hong Kong-born London composer Raymond Yiu; Huang Ruo, who mentored Alex Ho

Westward Ho!

Composer Alex Ho is part of a growing community of musicians combining their British and Chinese heritage in fascinating ways, writes Richard Morgan

On a hot summer evening at Southbank Centre, Alex Ho gets risqué: he invites his audience to follow Chinese custom by removing their shoes. The sweaty couple sitting in front of me exchanges shocked glances. 'This'll be different!' one eagerly says to the other.

What follows is an hour-long tale of *Ye Xian*, surprisingly familiar Chinese folklore – a kind woman trapped by a wicked stepmother and stepsister, who gets supernatural help to attend a royal ball, then leaves a shoe – but written 1,000 years before the Brothers Grimm's *Cinderella*.

It's Ho's show but he shares the stage with five other musicians, their personal anecdotes intersecting the fable. Flautist Daniel Shao balancing being 'the Chinese kid' in London and a *wàiguórén* (foreigner) in Beijing. Countertenor Keith Pun remembering his auntie telling him, 'Dreams can't be eaten like rice'. Erhu player Ziyang Huang summoning bravery for a guitar duet in London. Percussionist Joanne Chiang bartering with Buddha in a Taiwanese temple to become a vegetarian for six months if she aces a British audition. Percussionist Beibei Wang talking about how she 'escaped the fridge' as a *shèngnü* (leftover single woman) by coming to London at the ripe old age of 26: 'I'm not leftover; I'm marinating” And composer-conductor-pianist Ho's own trauma of Sinophobic slurs spat by snickering children in the wake of Covid. The performance ends with *Yuè Guāng Guāng*, a Cantonese lullaby inviting both rest and dreams.

The musicians' intimacy expands the fairytale into their own Cinderella moments of finding their fit. 'In her misery, Ye Xian forgot what it was to be accepted,' Ho tells the crowd. He may still struggle with acceptance, but he is past misery.

For this, he credits *Minor Feelings*, a 2020 collection of essays by Cathy Park Hong. 'I don't think I've ever felt so seen or heard: it's articulated so precisely but also so playfully,' Ho later tells me. 'It made me think much more actively about artistic expression in community.'

At the Southbank concert, Ho sports a blue silk *tángzhuāng*, a vestige of a photo shoot from years ago. It collected dust in his closet until a Windsor Castle reception this year with King Charles III in attendance. 'I wasn't particularly comfortable. I'm not into monarchy,' he tells me. 'I spent so much of my life trying to assimilate. I didn't want to perpetuate that narrative.'

> 'There are so many cultural differences in the Chinese diaspora. That's very exciting'

According to UK government data, 47.2 per cent of ethnically Chinese people in Britain are aged 18 to 34 – more than twice the White British rate of 20.3 per cent and in fact higher than all other ethnic groups (that's before a post-pandemic surge in Hong Kong immigration after pro-democracy crackdowns there). British arts organisations keen to build young audiences would do well to focus on Chinese repertoire.

Enter Ho, 32. London-born, trained at Cambridge and Oxford, co-founding the cross-

MIKE SKELTON, MAX LEE, MALCOLM CROWTHERS

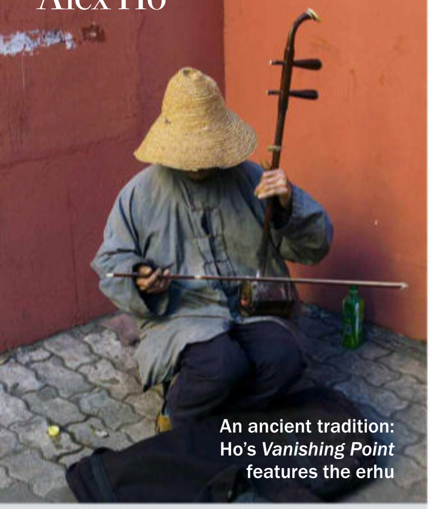
cultural music collective Tangram (who are also associate artists at LSO St Luke's), mentored by Guggenheim Fellow Huang Ruo and Pulitzer Prize winner Du Yun, and now working as a resident composer at Glyndebourne, Ho has a people-pleasing pedigree for the powers that be. Yet he retains an almost abrasive alacrity for agency as an artist. He has leveraged his double-outsider status as British-born Chinese into a strength, transforming an ethnically Chinese identity from an obstacle course to a playground.

'China is a plural noun,' he tells me over builders' tea at his Edwardian home in Nottingham (consequently, he always discusses 'Chinese cultures', never the singular). He refuses to be pigeon-holed – swinging from *The Glass Eye*, his 2022 dystopian song cycle about humans becoming worms, to a musical mash-up with five comedians counter-mocking European orientalism, due to be performed at LSO St Luke's in February 2026. Or a nascent horror opera inspired by the films *Get Out*, *Parasite* and *Last Night in Soho*.

'Alex and I joked we had the same bio because there was really only one path back then – but Alex and Tangram empowered me to do stuff I believe in,' says Rockey Sun Keting, 32, a Chinese-born composer who became a co-director of Tangram in 2023. 'There are so many cultural differences in the Chinese diaspora. That's why it's exciting. It's not one side against another. There are so many sides.'

'The big shift is away from monolith in contemporary music,' says Huang Ruo, 49, the globally sought-after Chinese-born composer who mentored Ho. 'More variety. More voices. More styles. Different composers. Different cultures. All telling our own stories in our own voices. Its mosaic is so much more colourful than a melting pot. We maintain our shapes, our identities, our accents.'

Far from a London-only renaissance, the fresh reach and allure of Chinese diasporic composition is epitomised by Huang, who last year debuted both his radically immersive *City of Floating Sounds* in Manchester and performed his redemptive retelling of Puccini, *M Butterfly*, in London – and had a sold-out run this year of his *Book of Mountains and Seas* in Edinburgh.



An ancient tradition: Ho's *Vanishing Point* features the erhu

Alexander the Great

Ho on three pivotal works

Vanishing Point *(2016)*
'In my first professional work, the Shanghai Philharmonic commissioned me to write for erhu and it was the first time I wrote for Chinese instruments. I had never heard of the erhu, actually. My mum was shocked. It unlocked something internally – not compositionally or sonically, but about myself. The final result imagines a distant horizon moving further away, which is how I felt at the time about losing touch with my heritage.'

Unveiling *(2022)*
'While I was artist-in-residence at Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier, they commissioned my wacky fanfare for a singing orchestra. It can be difficult to raise our voices. So, I asked the orchestra – untrained in singing – to literally raise their voices, something we should all do more. I hope it brought up questions for the audiences: what do we do with unfamiliarity, rawness and discomfort?'

Bound/Unbound *(2024)*
'I combined Chinese sword dance and Western opera. Created with Sun Keting for Tangram and the LSO, we tell the stories of Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman in the US, and Qiu Jin, the feminist Qing Dynasty revolutionary. The goal was to draw connections not just across culture but across time.'

MIKE SKELTON, GETTY

Cinderella stories: Alex Ho performs *Yi Xian*, alongside flautist Daniel Shao, countertenor Keith Pun, erhu player Ziyang Huang, and percussionists Beibei Wang and Joanne Chiang at Southbank Centre, London, 2025

Ho has even more irons in the fire. Critics call him 'experimental', and he scoffs. 'It's only an experiment if you're unsure of the outcome,' he says. 'I know what I'm doing.'

Paul Hughes, former long-time director of the BBC Symphony Orchestra who is now a top global consultant for classical music competitions, festivals and students, remembers being a juror in Beijing: 'These anonymous scores were imaginatively orchestrated, with wonderful colours. But it concerned me that, in asking who the composers were writing for, their answer was, "Well, we're writing for you." The Chinese diaspora, by contrast, has created their own culture. It hasn't set out to appeal, but it does because it has something to say. Something new. The impact is not because they're Chinese; it's because of what they're writing.'

> 'Ancient Chinese music was improvised. It was about presence - breath and silence'

Britain's rising tide has also lifted the pastiche riffs of Hong Kong-born London composer Raymond Yiu, 52, whose hyper-referential style pulls from the Chinese national anthem and *EastEnders* intro alike. In his debut Violin Concerto last year – a tribute to Ma Sicong, China's exiled 'king of violinists' – Yiu calls the standout solo an 'elaborated transcription' of a 1974 erhu tune. This year, he premiered *Chinese Whispers*, which sets to music text of his that he says was redacted by 'a certain Asian orchestra for its Beethoven 250 celebration in 2020'.

In his chapter on transcultural composing in *The Cambridge Companion to Composition*, Yiu finds kinship with Bartók's 'double bind of being Hungarian and aspiring to success abroad'. Similarly, Ho is developing a response to Mahler's own response to Chinese poetry. Both embody resonant reclamation.

Back at Southbank on an autumn afternoon, Ho catches Taiwanese artist Val Lee's debut solo UK exhibition at Hayward Gallery. 'I like to experience as much as I can,' he says, 'but you have to know you'll miss some things.' He still regrets missing last year's West End production of *Spirited Away*. So much has been missed.

Yiu's *Original Chinese Conjuror* and *Corner of a Foreign Field* have elevated some Chinese British history. And, for years, Ho has orbited Michael Shen Fu-Tsung, Britain's first recorded Chinese immigrant – in 1687 – whose portrait was commissioned by King James II and whose life brims with European spectacle. But it's a challenging history, full of rumour and misunderstanding, saddled by centuries of British ignorance and disrespect.

At the same time, Ho bristles at being braided and bridled by history and heritage. He aches for his humanity to be his identity, full stop. 'I hate my work being called Chinese music,' he tells me. 'I've composed music about chess. It's not always tied to being Chinese.' Certainly, ethnically Chinese composers in Britain today still struggle with day-to-day racism. Ho routinely gets mistaken as a waiter at Japanese restaurants. Brits compliment Sun's English as if her competence is surprising.

Their lives are unprecedented. Now, after countless challenges, they are generationally empowered to be who they needed when they were starting out. There's a Mandarin word, *zhōngyì* — more than like, less than love; Britain's Chinese diaspora are enjoying their *zhōngyì* era, yet still improvising their paths, their practices and their successes.

'Ancient Chinese music was all improvisation,' Wang reminds Southbank Centre's *Ye Xian* audience. 'It wasn't about perfection. It was about presence – the breath, the silence, the space between two notes – that was the music. Then modern China discovered Beethoven and Bach… accurate and precise. We chased Western classical music so hard we forgot that improvisation was ours too. I love improvising. It feels ancient, wild, awkward – but completely free. Improvising isn't about what you play. It's not about you. It's about how you listen, how you connect yourself with the world, and how you take responsibility to free yourself.'

Ho is free. He knows his duty is to help free others – musicians and audiences alike.

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Music & mercy

Harriet Constable, author of *The Instrumentalist*, explores Venice's Ospedale della Pietà, the girls' orphanage where Vivaldi taught and composed

I had assumed it would be located in the dank backwaters of Venice. The Ospedale della Pietà – the orphanage where Antonio Vivaldi spent most of his career teaching music – I thought would be hidden away, lurking somewhere to the north of the island, somewhere tourists do not usually venture. I thought Venice would have been ashamed of it, and of the girls who grew up here.

It was a surprise, then, to walk just a few moments from St Mark's Square and find myself facing an imposing building with green shuttered windows. I had to check Google Maps to make sure I was in the correct location. The Pietà, now the Hotel Metropole, looks proudly over the lagoon, occupying some of the most prestigious land mass in the world.

It was January 2022 when I first visited, in the depths of a winter still shadowed by the pandemic, although travel was finally allowed. Facemasks were to be worn on the streets and in the shops. The city was eerily quiet: my own footsteps followed me, echoing off the walls as I navigated the maze at night in search of a lost but tremendous true story.

The Hotel Metropole was closed when I arrived, as were most other hotels in Venice, but I was desperate to get inside. I called daily but no one answered. I took to walking past every afternoon, peering through the locked gates and seeing if I could spy anyone sweeping the floors, dusting the tables, preparing to open. Finally, after about three weeks, I walked past one afternoon and the doors were flung wide. There was music coming from inside.

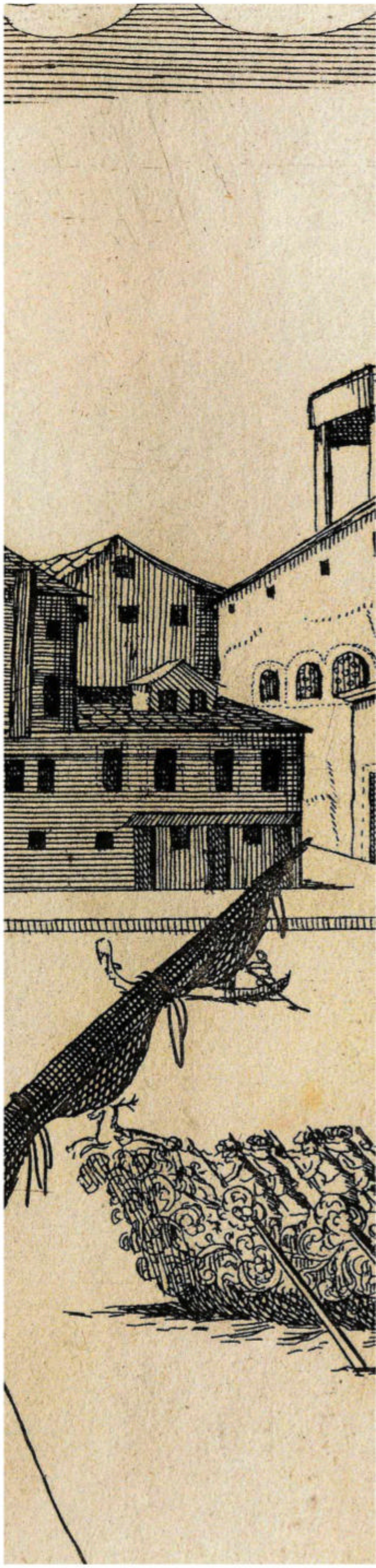
The PA to the general manager, an elegant woman called Silvia Calzavara, showed me around. She confirmed that this was indeed once an orphanage where girls were given a musical education, and that their teacher was Antonio Vivaldi, although the building has had quite the makeover since that era. The Metropole is now a five-star establishment where guests don Gucci bags and sip Campari spritzes, each cocktail complete with a skewered green olive drowning in the bitter red.

We made our way up onto the top floor and into one of the luxury suites with a terrace. I stood there, cool sun on my face, gulls cawing overhead, as St Mark's Campanile began to chime. The sound was so loud it shivered through my chest.

> At the time, poverty and gender bias meant hundreds of baby girls were being drowned

I thanked Silvia for my tour and made my way back to the waterfront, trying to piece together my thoughts. This was not what I had imagined. It was not a cobbled-together solution to house a collection of unwanted girls. This was an establishment formed of wealth and power. I was staring at the prototype for the original conservatoire of music, and the setting of my novel.

I began to research everything I could about the Pietà, and learned its story begins as far back as 1336, when it was founded as an institution to care for orphaned and abandoned girls. At



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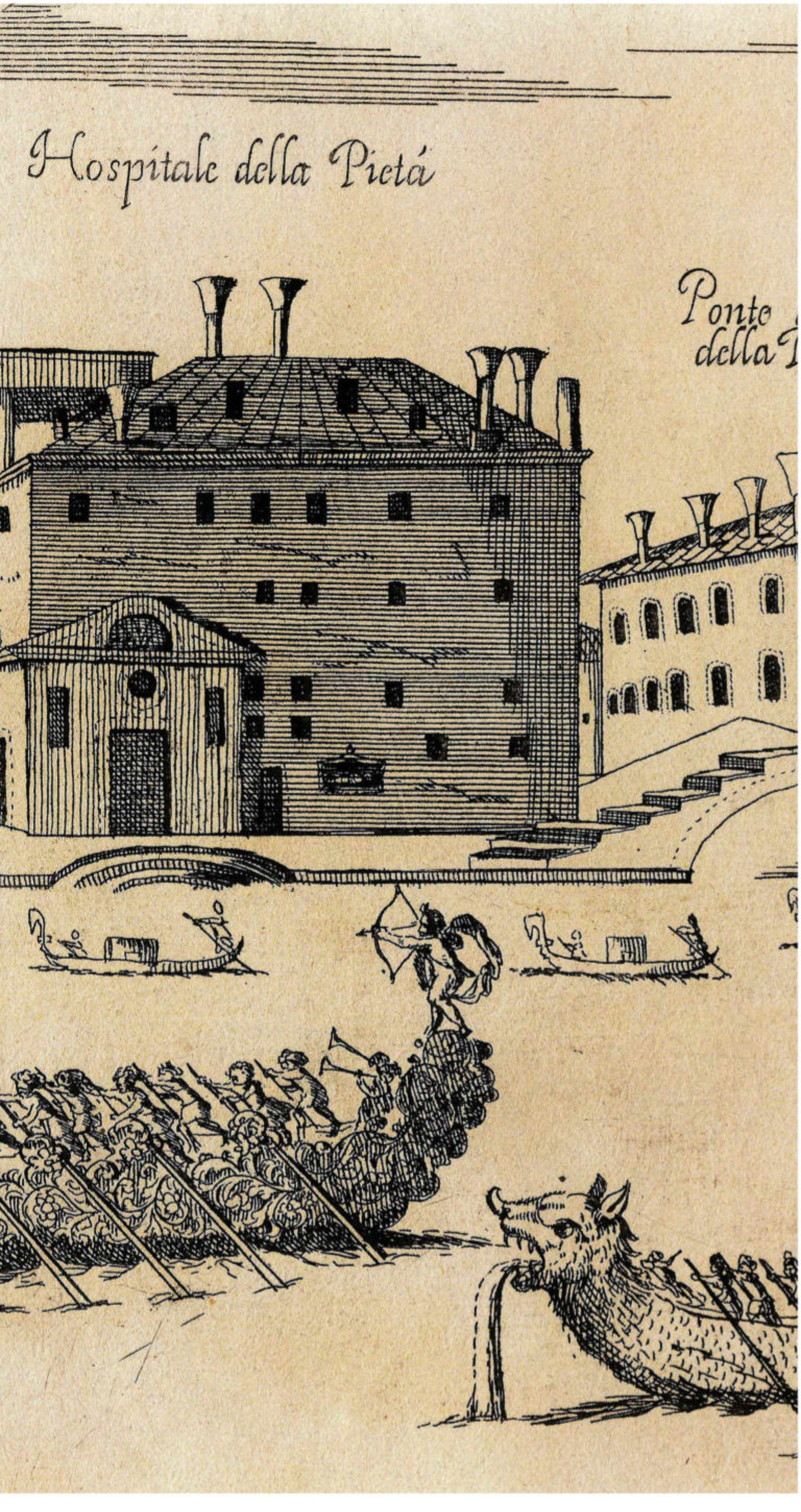
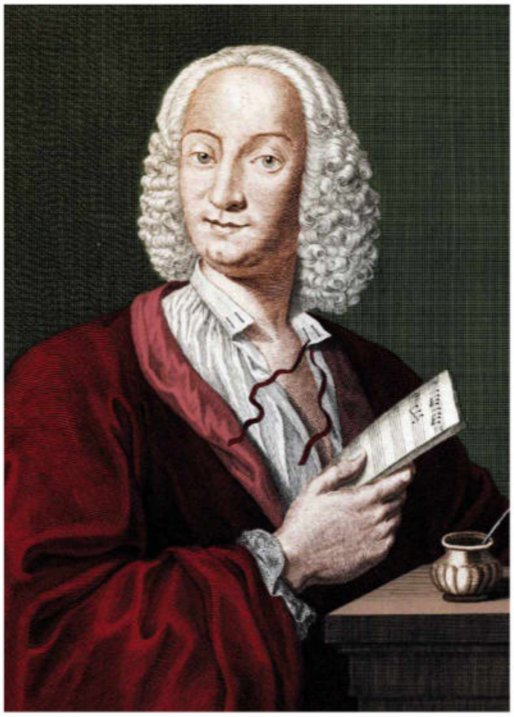
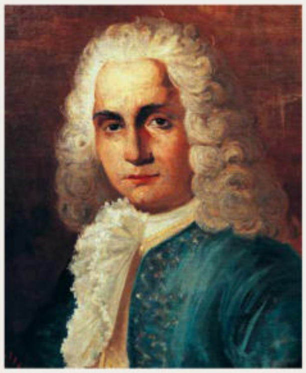




Famous façade: Chiesa della Pietà, part of the Ospedale and expanded in 1745; (above) Antonio Vivaldi; (main pic) a 1686 engraving of Ospedale della Pietà

the time, acute poverty, disease and gender bias meant that baby girls were being drowned in their hundreds in the Venetian canals. Boys, who were seen as more useful, were usually spared and put to work from a young age.

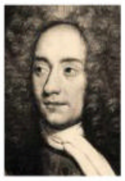
The idea of any kind of charity was a remarkably modern thought for the time, only possible because Venice enjoyed a particularly long period of political and economic stability. A government ruled – a mix of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy, rather than the



Multi-faceted: Benedetto Marcello

Abundance of riches

Early 18th-century Venice

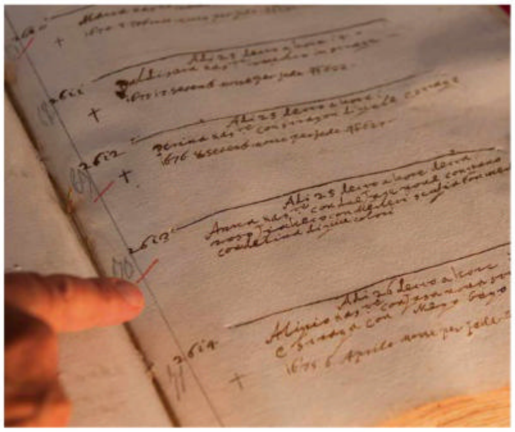


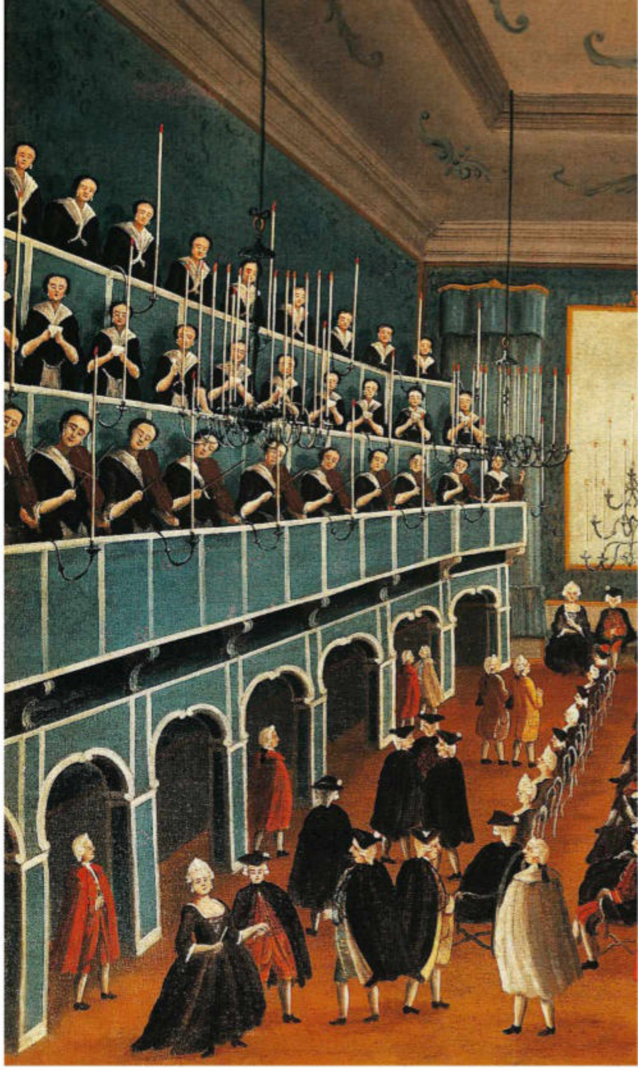
The Pietà was not the only *ospedale* in Venice in which music flourished in the early 18th century – a similarly high level of activity could also be found at the Incurabili, Mendicanti and Derelitti. It was, though, the wealth of theatres such as San Cassiano and San Giovanni Grisostomo that, showcasing new operas and star performers such as the castrato Farinelli, brought well-to-do visitors from far and wide. And, of course, the basilica of San Marco continued to be a major player in the sphere of sacred music.

All of which meant that there was plenty of work for the various composers plying their trade in the city. As well as Vivaldi, these included **Tomaso Albinoni** (above), best known today for 'his' falsely attributed *Adagio* but famous in his own day for his prodigious number of operas – over 80 of them, he claimed. Almost as prolific in the opera world was **Francesco Gasparini**, director of the Pietà who, like Albinoni, was admired from afar by JS Bach.

Leading the way in sacred music was **Antonio Lotti**, whose *Crucifixus a 8* is still a favourite with choirs today. And both he and Gasparini taught **Benedetto Marcello** (top), whose output included highly regarded church music and instrumental works.

Great expectations: (left to right) an original register of abandoned children from 1672-76, housed at the Chiesa della Pietà; *The Choir of Orphan Girls* by the Venetian Baroque painter Gabriel Bella (1730-99); Vivaldi's official letter of hiring by the Ospedale della Pietà





church. It gave the citizens freedom, empathy and the chance to cultivate art like nowhere else.

Because Venice was not just a wealthy place with educated inhabitants. It was also the Republic of Music. Venetians sang in the streets and on the canals, day and night. Shoeshines, knifegrinders and sailors all had their own tunes. Exploring the city must have been like stepping into a musical. The republic, and its fast-growing stream of international tourists, had a voracious appetite for performances and new music, and nowhere near the talent to meet the demand.

The answer of what to do with the large number of destitute girls growing up with little hope of marriage soon became obvious. Give them a musical education, the Venetians decided. They would contribute to society as composers, performers and copyists instead.

It went rather well. By the 18th century, the orchestra of the Pietà, known as the *figlie di coro*, was world famous. Kings and queens travelled from across Europe to see them. Wealthy aristocrats sent their children to the Pietà to learn from them. Superstars were born, like Chiara della Pietà, a violinist and soloist, Agata della Pietà, a composer and singer, and Anna Maria della Pietà, the girl that would become the lead character of my novel.

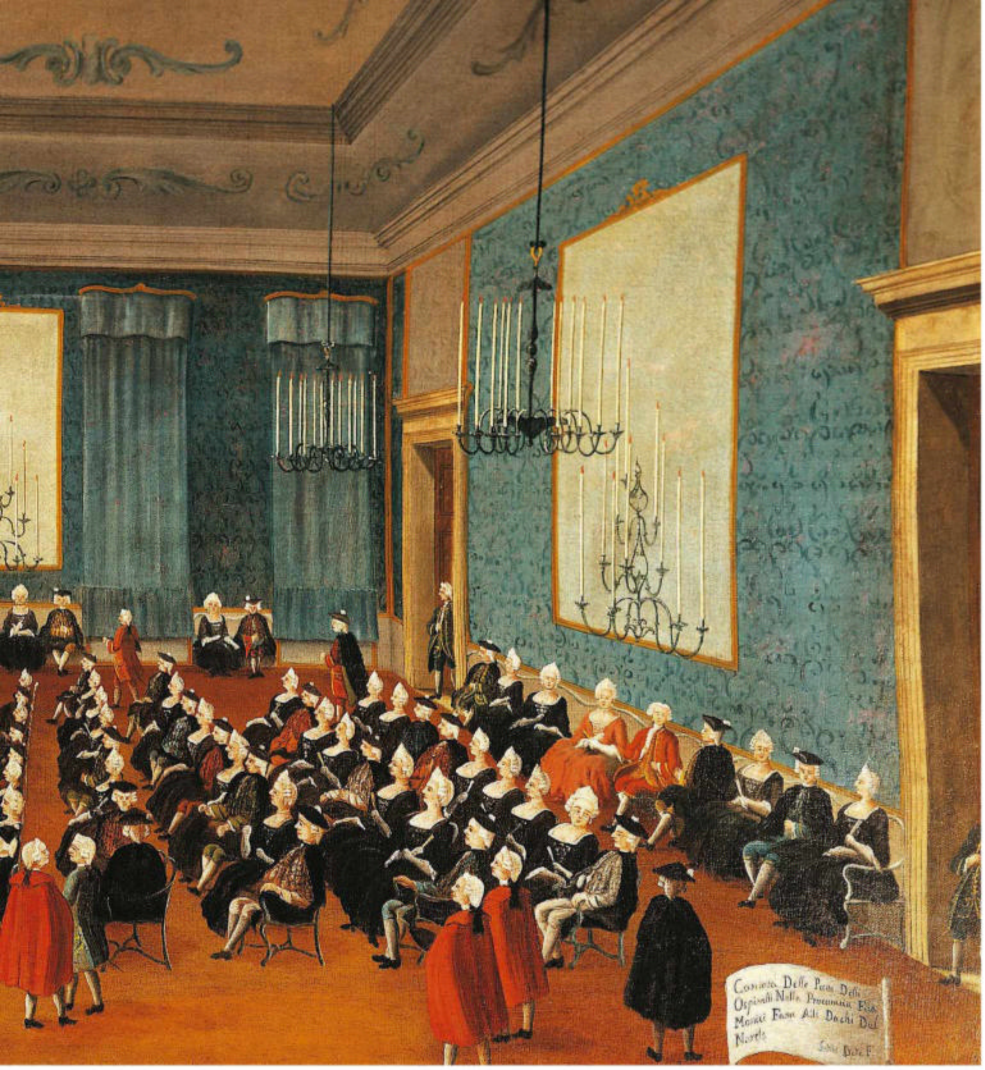
An orphan born in 1696, Anna Maria was recognised for her musical prowess by eight years old. She would go on to become an international celebrity and one of the greatest violinists of the 18th century. In 1739, French scholar Charles de Brosses suggested that, while she did not quite have the technical precision of the great Giuseppe Tartini, Anna Maria otherwise eclipsed him.

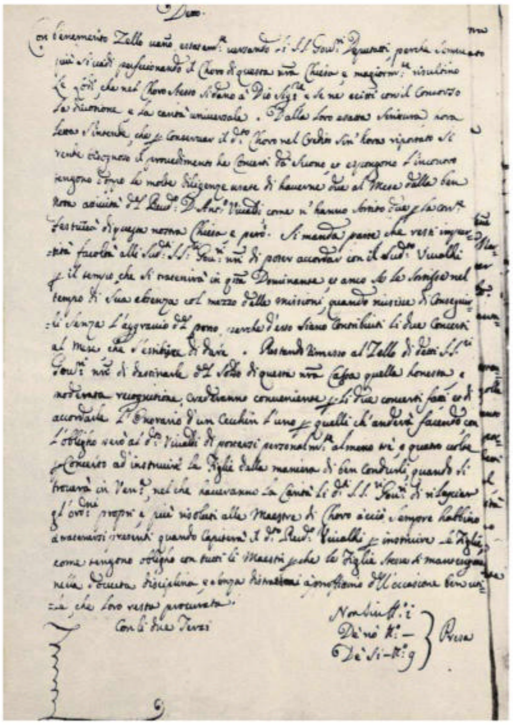
I was hungry to know what life must have been like for these orphan girls, who arrived at the Pietà by being posted through a hole in the wall when they were babies. Certainly, their musical education was a gift, and they were afforded opportunities most women could hardly have dreamed of. They earned money, they rubbed shoulders with elites, they were allowed to play instruments usually reserved for men. Yet life at the Pietà was not easy. Rousseau writes about the orphans in his *Confessions,* and says he was shocked to discover that the girls were disfigured by smallpox, that one was partly blind. 'Scarcely one was without some considerable blemish,' he concludes.

Because of this, and because the girls' performances were deemed to be so angelic they might arouse men and entice them to sin, the orphans were often made to perform cloistered away from the rest of the world in galleries behind barred grills. I wondered how frustrating that must have been, to be heard but not seen.

Still, their musical reputations were exquisite, and an institution with this kind of talent began to catch the attention of established musicians. The most famous Venetian to join the Pietà as a member of staff was Vivaldi.

Vivaldi was a young man, early in his career as a violinist, when he won his role at the Pietà in 1703. He was to become their Master of Music.



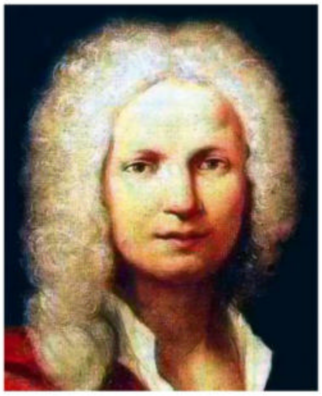


Working at the Pietà was a gift for a man with his ambition, not only because of the institution's glowing reputation, but because, as Marc Pincherle writes in his book *Vivaldi, Genius of the Baroque*, 'He held at his disposal a... laboratory of extensive and manifold musical resources.'

Vivaldi was required to compose endlessly; the Republic's hunger for music placed a crushing demand on his time. But in his role at the Pietà he had a plethora of copyists to help meet demand. It's possible these girls were even involved with composition. I started to imagine it like a moon landing. It's one thing to have a desire to go to the moon, and quite another to have the resources to build a rocket and actually get there. Vivaldi had the resources.

With this breeding ground of talent, he and his students were able to invent music the likes of which had never been heard before. Audience members talked about how, 'He placed his fingers at a hair's breadth from the bridge so that there was hardly room for the bow,' after they saw him perform during the Carnival of 1715. 'He played thus on all four strings... at unbelievable speed... everyone was astonished.'

Audiences were startled by the twists, the turns, the sheer speed of Vivaldi's music. It was in this innovative environment, with a collection of brilliant musicians by his side, that Vivaldi was able to crack out of the more restrained habits of Baroque and perfect a whole new form of music: the concerto. He would go on to spend most of his career at the Pietà and compose more than 770 works in his lifetime.



Vivaldi was required to compose endlessly. But at the Pietà, he had a plethora of copyists to help meet demand

The Pietà and its famous orchestra enjoyed centuries of acclaim, but the party came to an end in 1797, when the republic fell to Napoleon and plans for the Ospedale changed. While it would remain an orphanage for some time, the focus on musical education faded. Still, the Pietà formalised the idea of an institution for musical education. It became an inspiration for musical conservatories that would go on to blossom around the world, including Venice's Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello.

Today, one can still walk the narrow alleyway to the side of the Pietà building and stand at the place where the hole in the wall once was. I did so myself, imagining a mother placing her baby down and walking away, hoping desperately for a better life for her child. For hundreds of years, the Pietà girls' names and stories have been forgotten, but things are beginning to change, especially because scholars agree that without the Pietà and the *figlie di coro*, Vivaldi's music would not exist in the same form today.

We have a collection of disabled and disfigured orphans, destined to drown in the Venetian canals, to thank for the most famous classical piece on earth: *The Four Seasons*.

Harriet Constable's 'The Instrumentalist' is out now in paperback, published by Bloomsbury.

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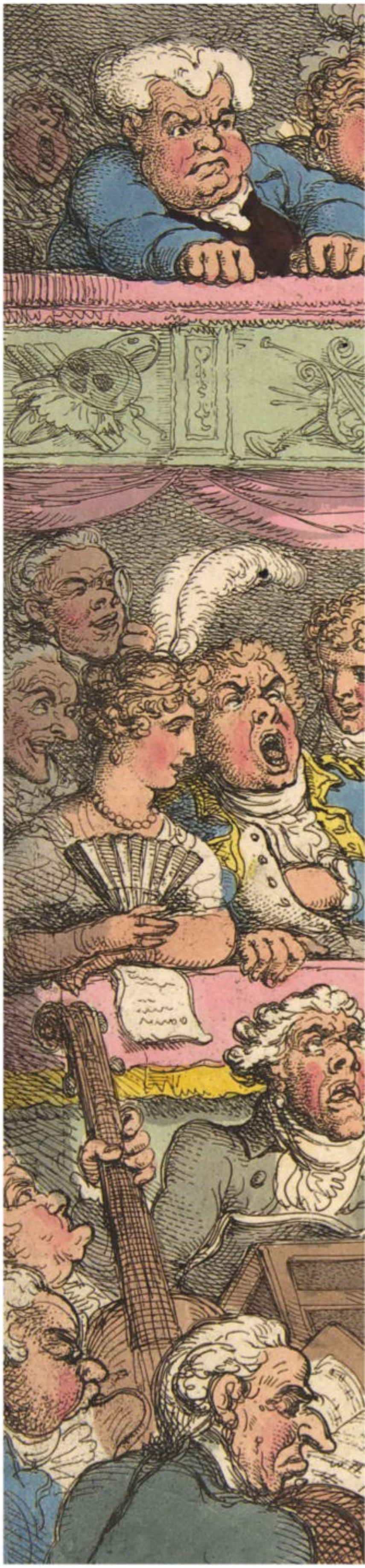

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Hiss and make-up

From boos to vegetables, opera stars have had to put up with all sorts being aimed in their direction over the centuries, as Alexandra Wilson explores

There is a famous scene in EM Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, in which a group of Edwardian tourists attend a performance in Tuscany of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. 'However bad the performance is tonight,' one of them quips, 'it will be alive. The Italians don't love music silently, like the beastly Germans. The audience takes its share – sometimes more.'

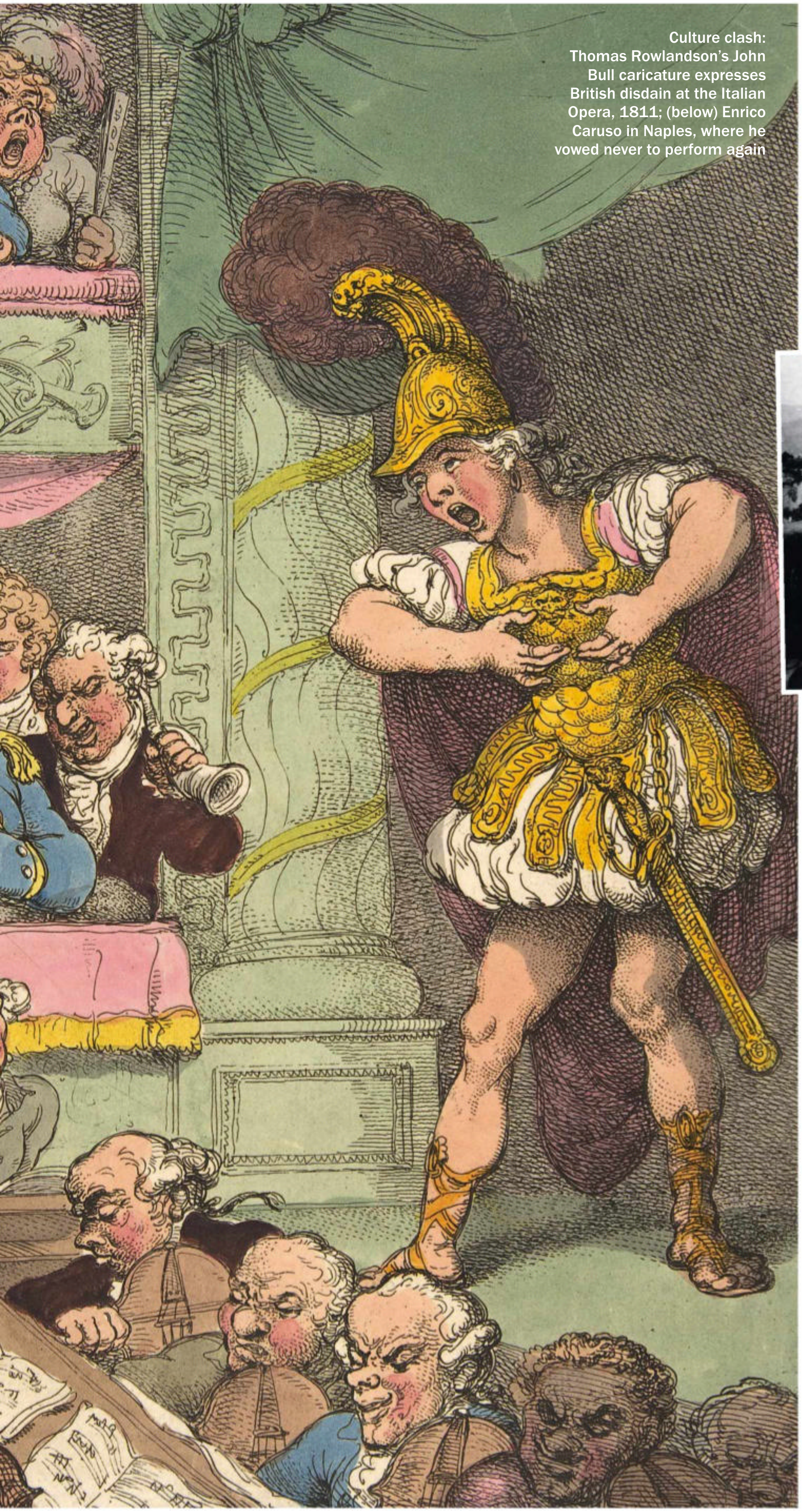
Though forewarned, his companions find themselves discomfited by what they hear that night from an audience that at times acts as if it were drunk. Their fellow listeners tap their feet and drum their fingers along with the music, talk through choruses, murmur and sigh approvingly throughout arias, and finally explode into jubilant shouts and applause. Forster uses this scene to symbolise the respective national temperaments of the Italians and the British: the former exuberant, warm and in touch with their emotions, the latter uptight, cold and repressed.

In earlier eras, however, British audiences would have been noisy, too. At London's opera houses during the Georgian period, there was a culture of audience members coming and going throughout a performance, eating, drinking, talking and flirting, which must have meant singers were used to performing against a background of constant hubbub. This relaxed, at times indifferent, attitude to watching an opera – with audiences concentrating only during the 'big tunes' – lingered on well into the 19th century. As the Victorian period progressed, however, the Queen's regular attendance at Covent Garden and the dimming of house lights eventually encouraged better decorum and a culture of quiet, attentive listening. Wagner's theatrical reforms at the Bayreuth Festival, designed to focus audience attention firmly on the stage, also gradually began to set an example of respectful audience behaviour that was adopted across northern Europe.

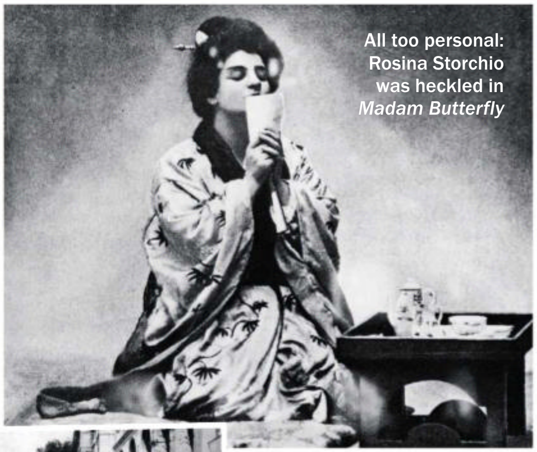
Italian audiences, however, maintained their 'liveliness', whether at home or abroad. Critics in early-20th-century New York often remarked on the expressive Italian expatriates who were a mainstay in the gallery at the Metropolitan Opera, and the Royal Opera House in London had an equivalent contingent of enthusiastic Soho Italians who turned out in force for operas from their native land. In both cases, these listeners were well-informed: one 1920s critic said that the Soho crowd discussed singers' voices with 'the connoisseurship of a stableman discussing a horse'.

> In Georgian times, audiences ate, drank, talked and flirted during performances

Singers have sometimes had to plough on through serious instances of disrespectful audience behaviour, in a variety of national contexts. It must have been challenging for the cast of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra in 1861 to continue singing as members of the infamous 'Jockey Club' (an aristocratic sporting club) disrupted the first performance –incessant hoots, shouts and dog whistles in protest at its lack of a conventional ballet scene that would allow the club's members to ogle the ballerinas' legs ultimately led to the cancellation of the run.



Culture clash: Thomas Rowlandson's John Bull caricature expresses British disdain at the Italian Opera, 1811; (below) Enrico Caruso in Naples, where he vowed never to perform again



All too personal: Rosina Storchio was heckled in *Madam Butterfly*

Where audience disorderliness has been targeted more personally at individual singers, this has not always been because of a bad performance. The premiere of *Madam Butterfly* at La Scala in 1904 was disrupted by what was almost certainly a hired claque. The rumpus of bellows, guffaws, animal noises and shouted personal insults – including cries of 'pregnant!' – meant that the leading lady, Rosina Storchio, was reduced to tears, unable to hear her cues. Such claques were often hired by rival singers or publishing houses in Italy, or took it upon themselves to attempt to bribe performers. Enrico Caruso refused to pay a claque for applause as a young tenor in Naples and after being booed vowed never to sing in his home town again.

On other occasions, singers have been left in no doubt that audiences have found fault with their voice. This crushing treatment has been meted out to the best of them – even Luciano Pavarotti was booed at La Scala in 1992 when he cracked a top B. And the most vocal in demonstrating their displeasure at that particular theatre have been the infamous *loggionisti* (occupants of the gallery), an audience subset that prides itself on being particularly discerning. Singers have varied in their willingness to take such behaviour on the chin. In 2006, French tenor Roberto Alagna responded to boos after his 'Celeste Aida' at La Scala by striding offstage and refusing to come back on; the theatre subsequently dropped him from the run. Maria Callas, on the other hand, returned to the Metropolitan Opera in New York for repeated doses of booing from merciless opera fans who had a zero-tolerance attitude towards her occasional vocal wobbles, and the playwright Terrence McNally even recalled

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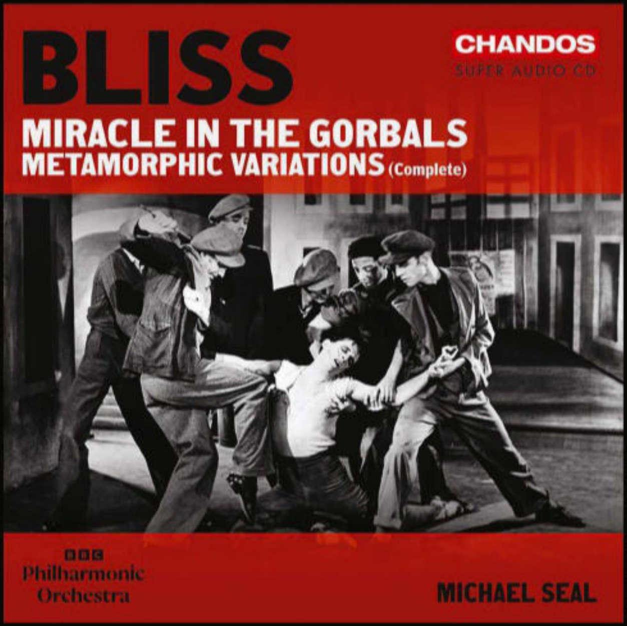
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Love and adoration: (main pic) the crowd show their appreciation for Pavarotti at the notorious La Scala, 1983; (right) Maria Callas at The Met, 1956

seeing her being pelted with vegetables.

Warm audience responses can also sometimes cause headaches for singers. Many a prima donna has had to duck from bouquets of flowers – albeit preferable to carrots – being thrown from the stalls. Audiences have often pushed singers to their limits, demanding repeated encores of popular arias – although the more egocentric have been only too keen to oblige. Mid-performance encores fell out of favour in the 20th century, as operas began to be viewed as total art works rather than a sequence of hit numbers, and La Scala and the Met went so far as to place bans on them, yet they are not completely unknown, even in the modern age. In 2008, tenor Juan Diego Flórez began to make a habit of repeating the aria 'Ah! Mes Amis' (with its many top Cs) in performances of Donizetti's *La fille du régiment*, reviving an earlier practice where the singer jumped at the audience's command.

Some opera fans have developed a level of adoration for particular singers that has reached the level of an obsession. The Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, who undertook an extensive, cannily marketed American tour in 1850, was widely said to have created a 'mania', being greeted by crowds of thousands wherever she went, her visit spawning the creation of a vast amount of merchandise and the renaming of streets and buildings in her honour. But opera fans can also be notoriously tribal, and sometimes committing your allegiance to one star can mean being prepared to mistreat another. The audience at La Scala (yes, them again) once booed, whistled and pelted the stage with debris when soprano Mirella Freni replaced local favourite Renata Scotto in a performance of Verdi's *La traviata*.

Singers' attitudes towards their adoring fans have also varied. No doubt some are irritated by the gaggle of enthusiasts at the stage door, but in the 1920s, two ordinary London girls, Louise and Ida Cook, managed to become friends with the star soprano Amelita Galli-Curci after hearing her sing at the Royal Albert Hall and sending her a fan letter. Galli-Curci graciously offered to give them free tickets to the Met and invite them for dinner if they could ever make it to New York, and ended up welcoming the sisters to her homes in Manhattan and the Catskill Mountains when they had painstakingly saved up the funds necessary to make the trip.

Opera fans can be notoriously tribal, and sometimes committing your allegiance to one star can mean being prepared to mistreat another

Such tenacity on the part of fans in pursuit of their goal has not been unusual, and some have proved themselves willing to go to extraordinary lengths to hear their preferred star sing. In 1964, 200 people queued in freezing cold weather for three days outside Covent Garden, prepared to sleep out on the street in their determination to secure a cheap standing position to hear Callas sing the title role in Puccini's *Tosca*. Claudio E Benzecry's book *The Opera Fanatic*, meanwhile, charts how audience members at the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires have turned opera-going into an all-consuming passion,

GETTY

Embracing the high Cs: Juan Diego Flórez in *La fille du régiment* at the Royal Opera House, 2007; (below) Katia Ledoux was gracious about 'detailed feedback'

making epic journeys of hundreds of miles to hear their favourite stars.

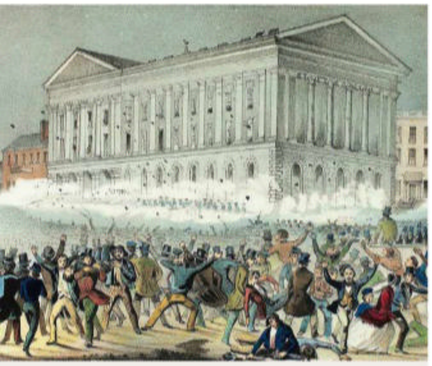
Sometimes, audience members are so keen to display their enthusiasm for a particular singer that they end up irritating those sitting around them. The notorious 'bravo man', well-known in London but no doubt found universally, who bellows his approval before a conductor has so much as lowered his or her baton, is widely regarded as a pest. A practice of default (and thus meaningless) standing ovations, blocking the view of the person sitting behind, has also been spreading across the globe from the US in recent years.

Modern technology has given audiences new mechanisms for expressing disappointment with a singer's performance, and some fans do not hold back in venting their spleen on social media. The hope, however, that this might shield singers from rude behaviour in the theatre itself seems to be a vain one. Indeed, online forums have even allowed groups of disgruntled opera lovers to plan coordinated booing campaigns, the *Corriere della sera* coining the phrase 'booing terrorism' (*terrorismo buatorio*) after just such an incident at La Scala at a performance of Bellini's *Il pirata* in 2018. Clearly, greater sensitivity in the 21st century to the fact that there is a real human being behind the celebrity persona has not curtailed the worst audience behaviour.

Attitudes towards the acceptability of booing individual singers seem to vary from country to country, even city to city. The practice lives on, as one might expect, in Italy, and most notoriously at that famous opera house in Milan, where audiences remain highly vocal in their responses, as likely to show their disappointment when a singer fluffs a top note as their delight when a performance goes well. However, singers have also been booed in recent years at Bayreuth (so much for polite German listening) and last January the French mezzo-soprano Katia Ledoux wrote online about the painful experience of being booed at the Vienna Volksoper, graciously characterising it as 'detailed feedback' on the part of a local audience known to be 'unique' and 'passionate'.

Being a city with a long, deep and serious engagement with opera and knowledgeable listeners does not guarantee respect. However, it is hard to imagine much boorish behaviour in Barcelona, where the audience is well known for being scrupulous in its pre-performance preparation and supportive of its local opera house, the Gran Teatre del Liceu. There are also few reports of booing in opera-loving Japan and South Korea (though soprano Angela Gheorghiu was booed in Seoul for attempting to stop a co-star performing an encore).

In London, booing an individual singer for his or her vocal performance is also now generally regarded as poor form, and the Covent Garden audience recently turned on an ill-mannered individual who heckled a child singer and was subsequently given a lifetime ban. Audiences in these cities do still boo, but nowadays they tend to reserve their rancour for someone else: the creative teams behind self-indulgent, gratuitous, or just plain poor productions. That, however, is a whole other story.



Class wars: rioting at Astor Opera

Very Bard behaviour

The Astor Place Riot

Unacceptably boorish they may have been, but even the worst opera audiences seem mild in comparison to New York's Shakespeare enthusiasts in the mid-19th century. Sadly, in one notorious instance, increasing hostility and lawlessness would lead to loss of life.

A bitter rivalry had grown between supporters of the two great Shakespearean actors of the age, Edwin Forrest and William McCready. While Forrest, an American, was revered as a local hero among the working class, the British McCready was largely championed by those of wealthier means.

When, on 8 May 1849, McCready was due to play Macbeth at New York's Astor Opera House, Forrest supporters got hold of 50 tickets in the balcony, from where they threw eggs, rotten potatoes and, eventually, chairs, leading to the performance being called off. Undeterred, McCready returned for a second go two days later, this time with police in the auditorium.

Despite interruptions, McCready made it through the performance. Outside, however, a crowd of around 15,000 people had gathered. When word got out that pro-Forrest supporters had been arrested inside, the crowd turned violent, and the police called in the militia. Over 20 people were killed in what would be known as the Astor Place Riot.

GETTY, WOLF-DIETER GRABNER

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It's all in the genes

Is it a bonus or a burden to be the musical child of musical parents? Michael White tracks down prominent examples for the inside story

As Philip Larkin's famous poem said, 'They f*** you up, your mum and dad.' And it's a notion that, since Larkin dropped it into common consciousness back in the 1970s, has gathered traction – notably in families where children grow up to be what their parents were. We're told that doctors/dentists/lawyers steer their offspring into dutiful pursuit of similar career paths, whether it's a good idea or not. And when it comes to music, everybody knows *that* runs in families. Think Bach. Think Mozart, Richard Strauss, Stravinsky...

But was Larkin right? And didn't Mozart, Strauss and co have reasons to be grateful – on the whole – for what their fathers gave them, passing on a way of life in which they flourished? Overbearing, pushy and exploitative he may have been, but Leopold gave Wolfgang Amadeus an extraordinary foundation for emerging genius.

Pondering these things, I went in search of latter-day musicians who grew up with prominent musician-parents, asking them about the pros and cons, and whether they'd have had it any other way. I wanted representatives of different generations, and compiled a list that honed in on composer Michael Berkeley, son of composer Lennox; composer Roxanna Panufnik, daughter of composer/conductor Andrzej; clarinettist Sacha Rattle, son of Simon; and Michael Papadopoulos, the young conductor (currently resident at the Vienna Volksoper) who is the son of conductor/pianist and founder of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra, Marios.

None of them, I should say at the outset, have regrets about the parents they were born to, or about growing up in a musical household. But that said, it's clear that being part of a high-profile musical household is a mixed bag of benefits and challenges when it comes to forging your own path in life. And the solutions, coping mechanisms, call them what you will, vary from person to person.

CHRIS MCANDREW, GEORGE NEWSOMN/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

> 'I often wonder whether I'd have found my way to composition if Lennox hadn't been my father, and I do think there may be something inherited'

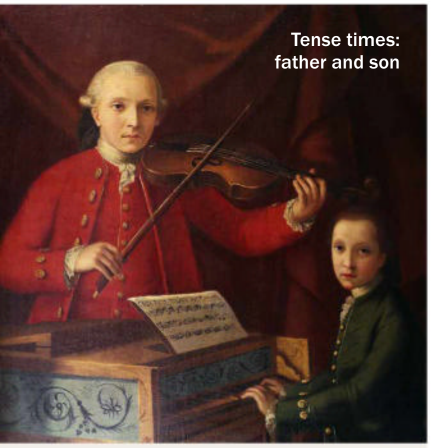
To start at the beginning, I wanted to know if anyone thought something musical passed from their parents in their genes; and for Roxanna Panufnik, the answer was yes. 'Not the conducting side of my father's life; I was too shy for that. But I feel a compulsion to compose that could well be genetic – although it took a while to show itself. As a child, I wanted to be an ambulance driver. It was only in my late teens that composition felt like something I could do; and even then, I didn't go for it straight away, composing on the side rather than as a career. It was only when my father died that I got serious about it.'

For Michael Berkeley, genes are a more ponderable influence. 'I often wonder whether I'd have found my way to composition if Lennox hadn't been my father, and I do think there may be something inherited. But then the question is why me, and not my two brothers – who both had musical ability but went off and did other things.'

Early experience, though, clearly counts for something; and I wondered at what point in childhood the realisation dawns that your parent does something unlike other parents and is famous for it?

'I knew early on that most fathers don't go to work in a studio at the end of the garden,' says Roxanna Panufnik, whose memories include 'going for walks when he would sing whatever he was working on – and how strange it

Like father, like son: composer Lennox Berkeley and son Michael Berkeley enjoy tea together in the 1980s; (opposite) the now Lord Berkeley of Knighton's official UK Parliament portrait, 2017



Tense times: father and son

Wolfgang & Leopold

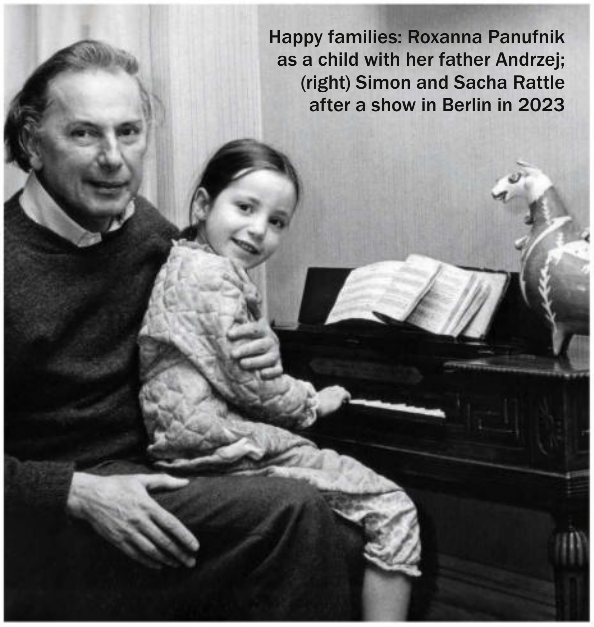
A fraught relationship?

The roller-coaster relationship between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his father Leopold has long been a source of fascination; and although documented in the letters that passed between them, it remains open to debate.

Leopold was sharp and intelligent – he studied philosophy and jurisprudence at Salzburg University – and in many ways a loving parent. Even the angriest letters to his son begin 'Mon tres cher fils'. And he unquestionably sacrificed his own career for the advancement of Wolfgang's. Until the early 1770s he had been a successful performer, teacher and composer; but when Wolfgang's genius emerged, Leopold dedicated more time to managing his son's career.

Historians might call it exploitation, but he showered Wolfgang with worldly wisdom about career-building. And he paid a heavy price, professionally, in Salzburg circles when Wolfgang left the service of the Archbishop in acrimonious circumstances.

Thereafter the relationship turned increasingly sour, aggravated by Wolfgang's marriage to Constanze against his father's advice. And after an apparent reconciliation in 1785, it went bad again when Leopold refused to take in his grandson Carl so that Wolfgang and Constanze could travel to England.



Happy families: Roxanna Panufnik as a child with her father Andrzej; (right) Simon and Sacha Rattle after a show in Berlin in 2023

was eventually to hear that music performed by other people.'

For Michael Berkeley there was a dazzling array of celebrities walking through the door, not least among them Benjamin Britten who was his godfather – 'and an incredibly good godfather too. Of course I didn't realise how privileged I was at the time. But I did understand it was something out of the ordinary that Poulenc would come to dinner, or I'd be introduced to Stravinsky or Shostakovich, and that these were terribly important people.'

Michael Papadopoulos had early exposure to more than a few star names as well, when they came to play with his father's orchestra. 'I was eight when I started shifting music stands for Oxford Phil concerts, which was one way of learning the business. And when I got older and became a student at Oxford, I'd be using my intimate knowledge of the city's one-way system to drive the soloists around. I can't say I went to many of the concerts, but my dad's name was there on the posters. There was no avoiding that.'

For Sacha Rattle, 'I knew my dad was busy, travelling a lot, and important; and he'd sometimes bring me onstage for rehearsals. But I don't think his fame penetrated that much into school. And it was only when he and my mother divorced, with everything in the press and reporters stalking outside, that I truly realised this wasn't normal parent stuff.'

As for learning and encouragement from these famous parents, the general feeling is that it was hands-off, unspecific and unforced. 'We never sat down at the dinner table and discussed Mahler,' says Sacha Rattle. 'Dad left work at work. And apart from some relaxed piano lessons, that was it. But I still learned a lot from him in broad terms: how he listens and lets players interact. I think about that constantly when I perform.'

There was no direct teaching, either, in the case of Michael Papadopoulos who says that whatever he learned was 'intangible. My dad's a dreamer, he has visions, makes things happen – which has certainly been inspiring for me. As well as the way he thinks about music: I know I've absorbed something of that.'

Otherwise, there's a strong sense among everyone of how important it was not to be a carbon copy of their parent. 'In fact, that's probably the key thing Lennox taught me,' says Michael Berkeley, 'to be myself. There are pieces of his that I love dearly, but he was essentially a classicist, writing with French polish, rarely heart on sleeve, while my music came out different, with a savagery and anger that was alien to him.'

Being different was a need. And for Michael it turned into something like rebellion when, after a childhood decorously spent as a Westminster Cathedral chorister, he formed a rock band – 'which did rather well and was a formative experience for me, although it left Lennox rather nonplussed. We called ourselves Seeds of Discontent, and we rehearsed in the basement under Lennox's studio. Which he was very sweet about. He thought it was a phase. And it was, although it came in useful later when I started writing film scores and did arrangements for Kate Bush. I knew the lingo.'

For Roxanna Panufnik the rebellion was milder: after doing 'not very well' at the Royal Academy, she went to work at the BBC for three years. And for Sacha Rattle there was never a desire to conduct: his world is mostly that of

Passing the baton: Michael Papadopoulos conducts his father Marios for the latter's 70th birthday celebration with the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra, 2024; (below) Sacha and Simon Rattle

CAMILLA JESSEL PANUFNIK/USED WITH PERMISSION OF PANUFNIK FAMILY ARCHIVE, NICHOLAS POSNER, PETER ADAMIK, GETTY

chamber music, 'very different from my dad's. I've only ever played under him in orchestras a few times, and it's been a thrill. But I work hard to keep myself my own musician and create my own opportunities. And in any case, his German orchestras use different clarinets to mine, so that rules me out with them.'

Behind a lot of these responses lies an understandable concern to steer clear of one major issue when you have a famous parent: the recriminations and comparisons. Roxanna Panufnik remembers 'hearing comments that my name opened doors for me, which meant I had to work all the harder to prove I had something of my own to say'. At one point she thought seriously about discarding the conspicuous Panufnik name for something else.

Sacha Rattle has never wanted to change his name but admits that 'professionally it's had slightly more negative than positive consequences. One of the very first reviews I ever had said, "We were expecting greatness from the son of Simon Rattle and all we got was a good student," which felt like the epitome of the struggle to come.'

Meanwhile Michael Papadopoulos, who conducted the Oxford Philharmonic last year for the first time ('It was terrifying'), has to deal with talk that he'll inherit the orchestra as of right when Marios retires. 'I try to shut down that conversation,' he says, 'because it's not how orchestras should be run. The OPO isn't a fish & chip shop that gets passed down to the proprietor's children.'

> One of the very first reviews I ever had said, "We were expecting greatness from the son of Simon Rattle and all we got was a good student"

But clearly there are things that do get passed down, in a good way, to the children of renowned musicians. Things they rightly celebrate. 'I'm proud of where I come from, proud of my dad, and feel incredibly lucky to have had his influence on my life,' says Sacha Rattle. And if successful parents cast a shadow from which children need escape, perhaps it lightens over time. Along with the need to compete.

'If people say they hear my father in me, I'm not displeased,' says Roxanna Panufnik. 'But it would have bothered me when I was in my twenties. These days I'm more confident.'

And it's the same for Michael Berkeley, who admits, 'I used to find it slightly annoying when people performed a piece of mine or Lennox's and just put Berkeley on the programme. But now I'm long enough in the tooth not to mind. And I'm perfectly comfortable with CDs that come out lumping us together. Being the one still alive and maybe more visible, I've become, in a quiet way, a champion of my father's music.'

Ultimately, it would seem that happy families prevail. And Philip Larkin isn't always right.

MUSICAL DESTINATIONS

Banff Canada

Spectacular views and equally stunning string quartet performances are on *Jeremy Pound*'s agenda as he heads to the Canadian Rockies

Peak performance: the Poiesis Quartet play to victory in Banff, 2025; (bottom right) competition director Barry Shiffman in conversation with composer Kati Agócs; pianist Ivana Gavrić enjoys a winter residence

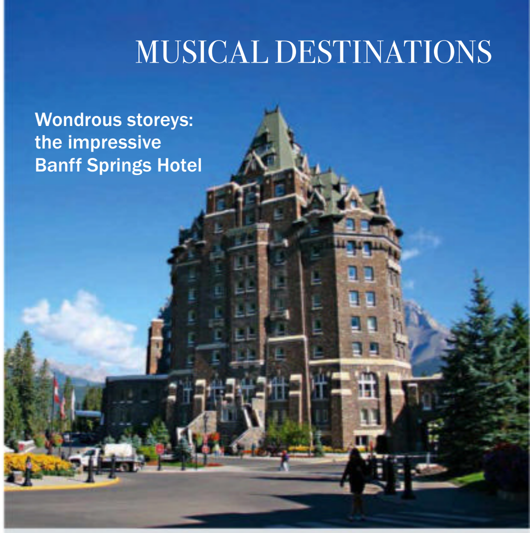
It's a bright August morning and I have a few hours before my next concert, so I'm going to head out for a stroll. As I make my way out of the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, however, I see a notice pinned to the door. 'It's berry season,' it warns. 'Bear encounters are likely. If you see a bear, stay calm, back away slowly and leave the area. Never run.' OK. Got it.

I don't particularly want to exit pursued by a bear (sorry, Shakespeare), but if I had to, I can't think of a more beautiful place to do so than here. Situated in the Canadian Rockies about two hours' drive from Calgary, Banff is surrounded by awe-inspiring peaks and evergreen forests, in which lurk those Grizzlies plus various other creatures very great and small. Skirting the town to the south are the azure waters and white rapids of the River Bow, on the other side of which spreads the world-famous Banff Springs Golf Course. Once, when asked if this was one of the most spectacular courses in the world, golf legend Bobby Locke simply replied, 'Not really. It's out of this world.'

But now let's head inside. If only Haydn had written a 'Bear' Quartet (as opposed to his 'Bear' Symphony No. 82), it would doubtless be a set piece at the event for which I am here: the Banff International String Quartet Competition (BISQC). Held triennially in the centre's Jenny Belzberg Theatre, the week-long BISQC sees ten quartets with players under 35 doing battle in four rounds designed to test their skills in repertoire ranging from (bear-free) Haydn to a new commission by Kati Agócs. Every group is there right till the

WARNING
Bear
in Area

Bear with us: a blunt notice about the local wildlife ...and here's why



Wondrous storeys: the impressive Banff Springs Hotel

closing Sunday, when the ten are whittled down to three for the final. It's a lot of quartet concerts, but strangely addictive.

Doing battle? That phrase doesn't sound quite right, as there is a palpable sense of comradeship here. Every quartet wants to win, of course – the prizes and the prestige are both substantial – but they all seem to want each other to do well too. And I am particularly impressed by the two quartets still in the bar enjoying each other's company well after most people's bedtime.

'Everything we do here is done to support the young musicians,' Barry Shiffman, director of BISQC, tells me. 'For instance, quartets are no longer eliminated early from the competition as they used to be. Why would you invite young artists to travel half way round the world to hear them play once and then say "Thank you very much. See you later."? We've got an amazing listening public here, so we should let them play for them – as well as giving more information to the jury and a better experience to the musicians, it also gives the audience a real festival.'

At times, I highly suspect there is more than one Barry Shiffman – wherever I look he seems to there, chatting to audience members, encouraging the players, organising this and that, and even starring on stage in a concert given by former winners. For him, said win came in 1992 as a violinist with the St Lawrence String Quartet, an experience that he says proved both a huge boost to the group's career and vitally useful to him when he took over as director in 2006. Under his watch, developments at BISQC have included the introduction of mentors to assist the competitors through the week plus the inclusion of audience lectures and other extra-curricular activities. I love it.

As summer turns to winter here, t-shirts turn to thick coats, hats and scarves, and golfers make way for skiers. The musical activity at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity continues all the year round, however. Since the centre's founding in 1933, creative artists of all sorts have been coming here to take part in programmes and residencies, honing their skills and learning from others amid such inspirational surroundings. One such artist was pianist Ivana Gavrić, who took part in a six-week creative residency in the winter of 2010. 'I would often try to practise in one of the forest studios that are scattered around the grounds,' she tells me. 'One day, I nearly walked into a massive moose on the path. He just casually walked away when he saw me.'

> ## 'We've got an amazing public here, so we should let the quartets play for them'

So far below freezing were the daily temperatures during Gavrić's stay that she was advised against venturing away from the centre. Summer visitors, in contrast, are positively encouraged to take a walk into the charming town centre and through the woodland along the river. Or, going further afield, one can head up on a chairlift to admire the view from nearby Mount Norquay or drive to Lake Louise and gaze at its famous turquoise water.

Incidentally, Gavrić also explains to me why, against the usual convention, all the doors in the Banff Centre open by pulling rather than pushing from the outside. In short, you really don't want a bear ambling in and joining you as you listen to a Janáček or Schubert string quartet...

Further info: banffcentre.ca

RITA TAYLOR/COURTESY OF BANFF CENTRE FOR ARTS AND CREATIVITY, GETTY

Local landmark

Banff Springs Hotel

You can't miss the chateau-like Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, as it is vast, its 11 storeys looming over the River Bow and golf course below. Its initial construction, in 1886, came soon after that of the Canadian Pacific Railway, with the intention of luring skiers to the Rockies. It worked. Over the years, the hotel was expanded to its present size, while famous visitors have included George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their 1939 tour of Canada. Designated a National Historic Site of Canada in 1988, its terrace is the perfect place to sit with a glass of wine and admire the view.

Composer of the Week is broadcast on Radio 3 at 4pm, Monday to Friday. Programmes in Dec 2025 are:
1-5 December John Rutter
8-12 December A Medieval Christmas
15-19 December Prokofiev
22-26 December A Georgian Christmas
29 Dec – 2 Jan British Light Music

Morten Lauridsen

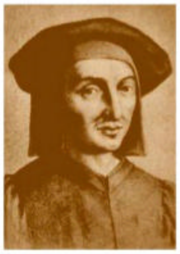
Terry Blain explores the life of a self-imposed recluse whose magical *O Magnum Mysterium* beguiles millions of listeners each Christmas

ILLUSTRATION: MATT HERRING

Lauridsen's style

The power of melody Lauridsen's music is extremely popular with choirs, not least because its scrupulously contoured, expressive melodies lend themselves so readily to singing. 'I constantly sing each line as I am composing,' he explains, 'to make sure that each part is lyrical and gracious for the singer.'

Renaissance influences He has long admired the contrapuntal techniques of Renaissance masters such as Victoria, Monteverdi and Josquin (left) and their skill at word-painting. He co-opts their methodology to add textural richness and structural integrity to pieces such as *O Magnum Mysterium* and *Lux Aeterna*, while keeping his own distinctive identity.



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Musical theatre Lauridsen's mother played jazz piano and sang around the home, and he imbibed the Great American Songbook from her as an infant. The tuneful influence of the great Broadway composers can be clearly heard in settings such as Lauridsen's 'Where Have the Actors Gone' and 'Sure on This Shining Night'.

Deep spirituality Lauridsen has written mainly choral music, which is loved above all for its deep-seeing spirituality and the sense of comfort that it offers. His 'probing, serene work', notes one commentator, 'contains an elusive and indefinable ingredient which leaves the impression that all the questions have been answered'.

On the morning of 15 November 2007, Morten Lauridsen stepped onto a podium in the East Room of the White House to receive the National Medal of Arts from president George W Bush. He was 64 at the time, and the award capped four decades of creative endeavour during which he had become the most frequently performed choral composer in the US. The Medal celebrated Lauridsen's achievement, lauding 'his composition of radiant choral works combining musical power, beauty and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide'.

Lauridsen's career as a composer had, remarkably, come perilously close to never happening. When he started university at Whitman College in 1961, he took no courses at all in music. He was happy, it seemed, to view his musical activities (playing trumpet and piano, often in jazz ensembles) as merely a spare-time 'avocation'. The following summer, however, his vacation job with the Forest Service led to a posting at a lookout tower south of Mount St Helens, in his home state of Washington.

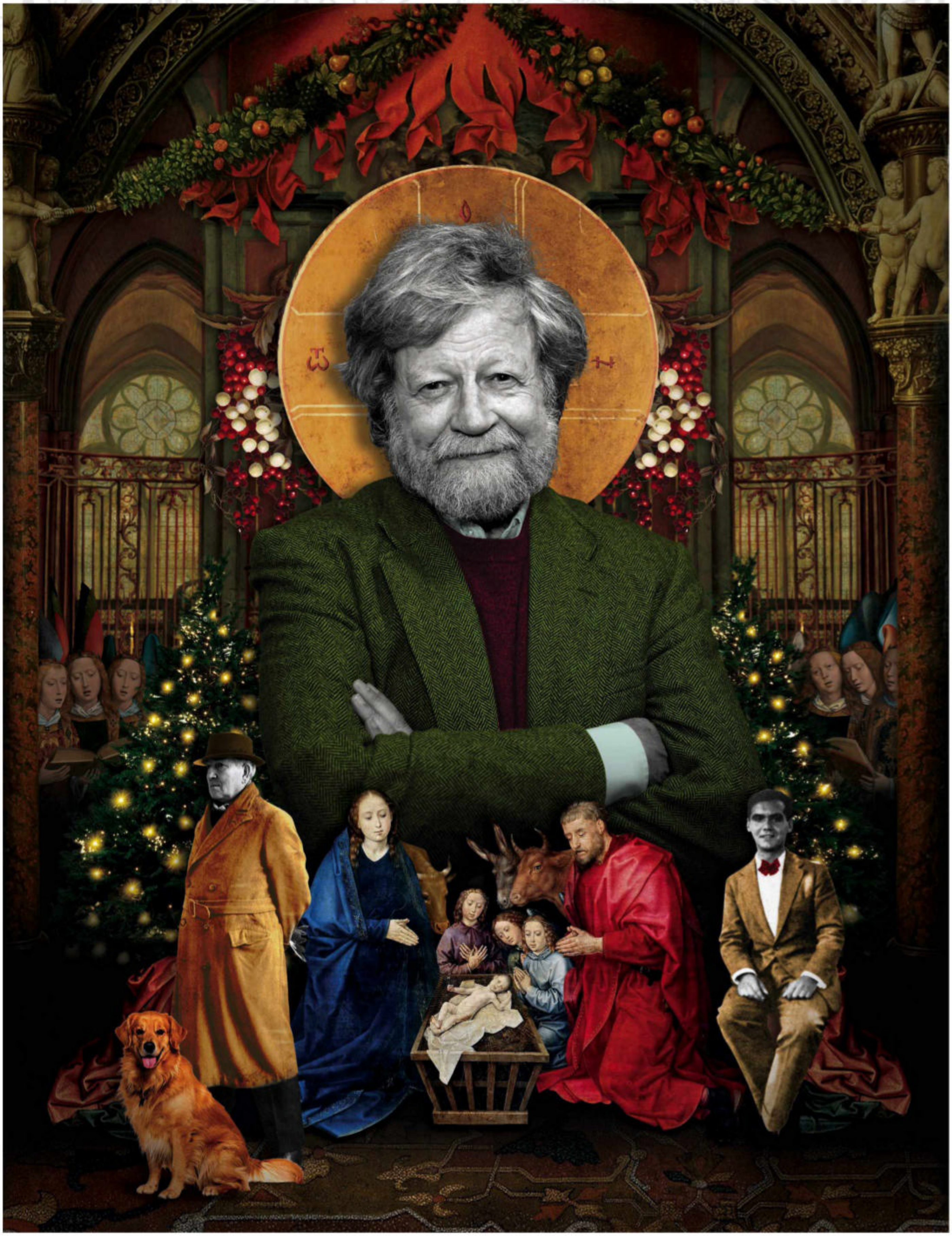
'I was up in that tower for ten weeks, alone, and it was a life-changing experience'

'I was up there for ten weeks, alone, and it was a life-changing experience,' he has since recalled. 'You're above the clouds, the sun is beating down and it's just you and all these magnificent mountain-tops. It was a real emotional experience for me, beauty beyond description'. He nonetheless felt compelled to try describing it, in the language that came most naturally to him – music. 'So I came off that tower and went back to Whitman College, and laid my hands on every music class I could'.

Compositions of his own did not immediately follow. They came a year later, when Lauridsen transferred to the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, where he produced a Trumpet Sonata and an early choral piece. Then, in 1965, a 'vocal cycle' arrived, the first of eight such cycles which form the backbone of his output. Entitled *A Backyard Universe*, the work's three songs (for tenor and piano) explore a prelapsarian world of innocent, gambolling childhood, in a bright-eyed style quite different from the numinous choral masterpieces which came later.

A second vocal cycle followed soon after. *A Winter Come*, six songs for soprano and piano, featured confidently vaulting vocal writing, and pointillistic piano lines glinting like icicles in the wintry landscapes Howard Moss's poems depicted. The style was subtly different from *A Backyard Universe* – less tonally centred, more ambivalent in feeling – but again seemed wholly fresh and distinctive. 'A superb, spare-textured and deeply felt cycle of six songs', was how one reviewer put it. Around the same time as composing it in 1967, Lauridsen began teaching at USC, which he did for the next 52 years.

The 1970s were a relatively quiet period compositionally, as Lauridsen settled into academic life and negotiated 'trying times, involving personal relationships'. A couple of brief choral pieces, the buoyant *O Come, Let Us Sing Unto the Lord* and the ▶



introspective *I will lift up my eyes*, appeared in 1970. Then, in 1976, came an apparent curveball – a poignantly nostalgic song entitled 'Where Have the Actors Gone', showcasing Lauridsen's long-standing love for American music theatre. 'My esteem for the great Broadway songwriters has only deepened over the years,' he later commented. 'I have considered writing a work for the musical stage, which will probably happen in the next life.'

The 1970s did bring one crucial, seemingly non-musical, development. In 1975, Lauridsen bought an abandoned general store on the waterfront of Waldron Island, a remote island off the northwestern seaboard of the US, close to Canada. The location was not new to him. His aunt and uncle had owned a beachfront property on Waldron, and as a child Lauridsen spent summers there escaping the miseries inflicted by his father, 'one of the most abusive sons-of-a-bitch that ever walked this planet'.

Now, for the adult Lauridsen, Waldron became once more a sanctuary, where his music could incubate far from the job commitments and city-squeal of Los Angeles. 'I moved in there with a $50 piano that I barged up to the island, a golden retriever, some hand tools, a sleeping bag and a little Coleman stove,' he recalls. 'And in the serenity, the calmness of this place, I was able to go down deeply within myself and set texts that have resonated with people all over the world.'

Texts are, in fact, exceptionally important to Lauridsen, a lifelong devotee of poetry (he began each class at USC by reciting a poem). 'I initially respond viscerally to poems,' he explains, 'and then explore all facets of the poem and the poet in deciding whether to set the text to music or not.' Robert Graves is a favourite writer, and Lauridsen chose five of his poems for the 1980 choral cycle *Mid-Winter Songs*. These settings have a sustained intensity new in Lauridsen's work, and in their tightly integrated motivic textures one senses a deliberative flexing of his compositional muscles.

> 'In the serenity, the calmness of this place, I was able to go down deeply within myself'

Another major poet, Federico García Lorca, was chosen for the *Cuatro Canciones* for soprano, clarinet, cello and piano in 1981. While similarly intense emotionally, the Lorca cycle is strikingly different to *Mid-Winter Songs* in idiom – 'atonal, highly colourful and gestural', in Lauridsen's own description. The range of styles used is quite deliberate, he notes, and stems directly from the texts he sets.

'I choose my musical materials – harmonies, melodies, form, rhythm, stylistic approach – to complement the content, style, era of creation, language of the poet,' he comments. 'This is why there are such diverse musical approaches and contrasts among the cycles.' These include the marked differences between the fiery, Monteverdi-influenced *Madrigali* (1987) and the softer, more intimate *Les Chansons des Roses* (1993), where Lauridsen sets five poems by Rilke. The fifth of these, 'Dirait-on', was conceived as 'a tuneful chanson populaire, or folksong'. It proved especially popular, and its long, mellifluous lines provide a clear link to the piece which truly made Lauridsen an international figure: *O Magnum Mysterium*.

Composed in 1994 for the Los Angeles Master Chorale (where he had become composer-in-residence), *O Magnum Mysterium* sets the time-honoured Latin text describing the mystery of Christ's birth, with animals onlooking in the manger. Completed in the tranquillity of Waldron Island on the $50 piano, the work's contemplative beauty and spiritual luminosity struck an instant chord. Intended as 'a quiet song of profound inner joy,' it has since become his most recorded piece and a classic of the choral repertoire.

O Magnum Mysterium lasts just six minutes, but composing it did not come easy. '*O Magnum* was one of the most difficult pieces for me to write,' Lauridsen remembers, as he worked to eliminate material that was 'extraneous' and 'too complicated' for the setting. 'Whacking away' is how he describes the process of whittling down musical ideas to their expressive essence. 'Composing is the most difficult thing of all for me to do. For every note I save there are tens of thousands I don't. We're trying to reach a very deep inner spot, and to do that takes a lot of digging and a lot of sorting through.'

By general consent, another 'deep inner spot' was reached with the completion

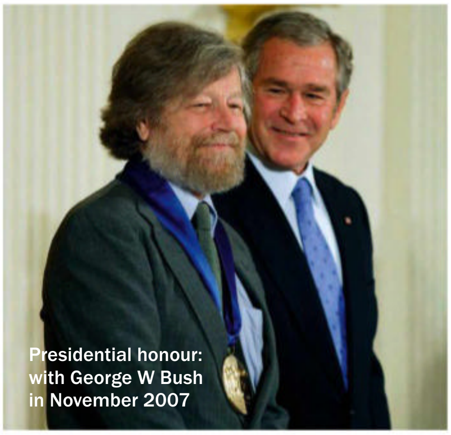
GETTY, DAGMAR TITSCH/DG, ALAMY

Choral master: (far left) Morten Lauridsen on tour with conductor Nicol Matt and The Chamber Choir of Europe, 2018; (left) poets Robert Graves and Federico García Lorca have both inspired works

three years later of Lauridsen's choral cycle *Lux aeterna*. Here, more than anywhere else, we sense his veneration of Renaissance music: the five interlinked movements of *Lux aeterna* feature extensive use of counterpoint, canon and chant-like melodic material, with light as a central metaphor. While not narrowly 'religious' in inspiration, it unquestionably has a spiritual dimension, plus a strong personal motivation. 'I wrote it as my mother was in the process of dying,' Lauridsen remembers. 'I simply tried to write something very, very beautiful, a quiet meditation about illumination. And people connect with that, and very often go into a transformative estate that connects with something very deep inside of them.'

Eight years later came *Nocturnes*, the last of the choral cycles he has completed to date. Its third song in particular, the radiantly pantheistic 'Sure on this shining night', is another reminder of Lauridsen's ability to see into the heart of things, and make spiritual insights palpable in music. Musicologist Nick Strimple has called him 'the only American composer in history who can be called a mystic'.

Lauridsen himself, though, emphasises how a deep concern with the predations humans are visiting on one another and the planet are central to his mission: 'I look at myself as an individual in a long string of creative artists that have done whatever they could, often in dire circumstances. There are so many things that are counteractive to that in our life today, and I think it is our duty to counteract forces that detract, that denigrate, that lower us. We have to do what we can to turn the tide to this kind of stuff.'



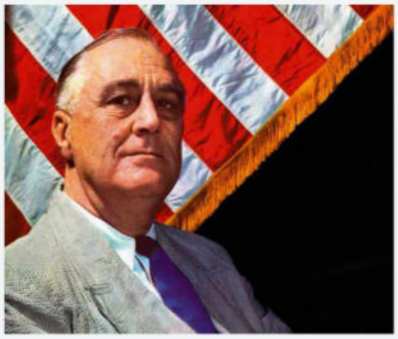
Presidential honour: with George W Bush in November 2007

LAURIDSEN Life & Times

1943

LIFE: Morten Lauridsen is born on 27 February in Colfax, Washington, US. Inspired by listening to his mother playing the piano, he takes up the instrument himself at eight.

TIMES: With unemployment figures plunging due to World War II, the Great Depression officially ends in the US, and president ***Franklin D Roosevelt*** closes the Work Projects Administration.



1967

LIFE: After studying composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, he begins teaching there, a post he will hold for 52 years until his retirement in 2019.

TIMES: Performing 'Light my fire' on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, ***Jim Morrison and The Doors*** defy CBS censors by singing the word 'higher' when they have been specifically asked not to.

O magnum mysterium

1994

LIFE: He is appointed composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale who, on 18 December, perform the world premiere of his festive motet ***O Magnum Mysterium***.

TIMES: Argentinian footballer Diego Maradona tests positive for ephedrine, a performance-enhancing drug, at the FIFA World Cup and is subsequently suspended for 18 months.

1975

LIFE: He purchases 'Crum's Castle', a dilapidated former general store with no grid electricity, municipal running water or phone service, on Waldron Island by the Washington coast.

TIMES: Travis Walton, a 22-year-old logger, suddenly disappears while at work in a forest in Snowflake, Arizona. When found five days later, he explains that he was abducted by aliens.

2007

LIFE: He is presented with the National Medal of Arts by US president George W Bush, in recognition of his 'radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power and spiritual depth'.

TIMES: In Washington state, the second span of the ***Tacoma Narrows Bridge*** over the Puget Sound strait opens, making it, at 1,646m, the longest twin suspension bridge in the world.

2012

LIFE: Filmed in various locations from San Francisco to Aberdeen, Scotland, ***Shining Night***, a documentary film about his life and music by producer Michael Stillwater, goes on to be nominated for several awards.

TIMES: In the US presidential election, incumbent president Barack Obama wins a second term when he defeats the Republicans' Mitt Romney by 332 electoral votes to 206.

SHINING NIGHT
A PORTRAIT OF COMPOSER MORTEN LAURIDSEN
a film by Michael Stillwater

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Swan Lake

A compelling narrative and a bevy of stirring melodies did not prevent the Russian's ballet ruffling feathers at its outset, as ***Jo Talbot*** explains

The composer

The premiere of *Swan Lake* towards the beginning of 1877 was just one major occasion in what was to prove a significantly eventful year for the 37-year-old Tchaikovsky. One particularly notable date in his diary was 6 July, the day of his wedding to Antonina Miliukova – but within less than two months, the disastrous marriage had fallen apart. On a considerably more positive note, the year also saw the premiere of his *Variations on a Rococo Theme* (in November), plus the composition of the majority of two masterpieces, his Symphony No. 4 and the Pushkin-inspired opera *Eugene Onegin*.

Building a Library is broadcast on Radio 3 at 3.30pm each Saturday as part of *Record Review*. A highlights podcast is available on BBC Sounds.

The work

'I accepted the commission partly for the money, and partly because I have long wanted to try my hand at this sort of music,' wrote Tchaikovsky to Rimsky-Korsakov. For the sum of 800 roubles (around £20,000 in today's money), Tchaikovsky produced one of the most groundbreaking and popular of all ballets – the universal themes of love, betrayal and good versus evil set an intoxicating magical backdrop to the compellingly Romantic score, with an embarrassment of sublime melodies. Tchaikovsky's patroness Nadezhda von Meck perfectly defines this: 'he inspires you to take leave of your senses'. Given the climate of autocracy and censorship in Tsarist Russia, this level of personal expression had extra significance – the reality beneath the surface.

Tchaikovsky began the score in 1875, following a commission from the Bolshoi Theatre directorate. The libretto, by Vladimir Begichev and choreographer Julius Reisinger, drew inspiration from many sources – the Roman poet Ovid's ideas of swans as a symbol of womanhood and transformation into birds were possible ones, as was Karl August Musäus's German fairy tale *Stolen Veil*, where a soldier takes the magic veil of the swan maidens. Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* also shares the story of the hero unwittingly betraying his true love, coupled with the use of the swan as a symbol of purity and innocence.

Ballet music from French opera composers such as Gounod and Mozart's translucent instrumental clarity inform Tchaikovsky's style, and his strikingly deft touch with orchestration also features a strong element of percussion that was deemed necessary for providing the dancers with an audible pulse. Wagner's use of leitmotifs, key relationships for the characters and thematic transformations were also important – there are an intricately worked set of related keys that reflect the state of the characters' emotions at any given time, and Tchaikovsky artfully constructed these relationships to bring symphonic coherence to the drama. In short, symphonic elements shake hands with traditional set numbers such as the Polish mazurka, Russian and Neapolitan dances, required by the ballerinas to showcase their skills.

Though a master of composition, Tchaikovsky had much to learn about prima ballerinas

The plot itself is fairly simple. While out hunting, Prince Siegfried chances upon a group of swans, one of whom wears a crown. When he takes aim, the swans disappear and a crowned maiden appears – she is Odette, Queen of the Swans, who along with her peers has been transformed by the evil magician Rothbart, and only the love of someone who has not pledged it to anyone else can save her. Siegfried and Odette fall in love, but in Act III, a ball takes place in which he is required to choose a bride. Rothbart presents him with his daughter Odile, who looks uncannily

Many swans-a-gliding: the Imperial Russian Ballet Company performs *Swan Lake* in Ankara, Turkey, 2025; (below) Marius Petipa's famous Mariinsky revival of the ballet, 1895

similar to Odette (the two are normally played by the same person), and the Prince is won over. As he pledges his love, Odette appears in desperation at the window. It does not end well…

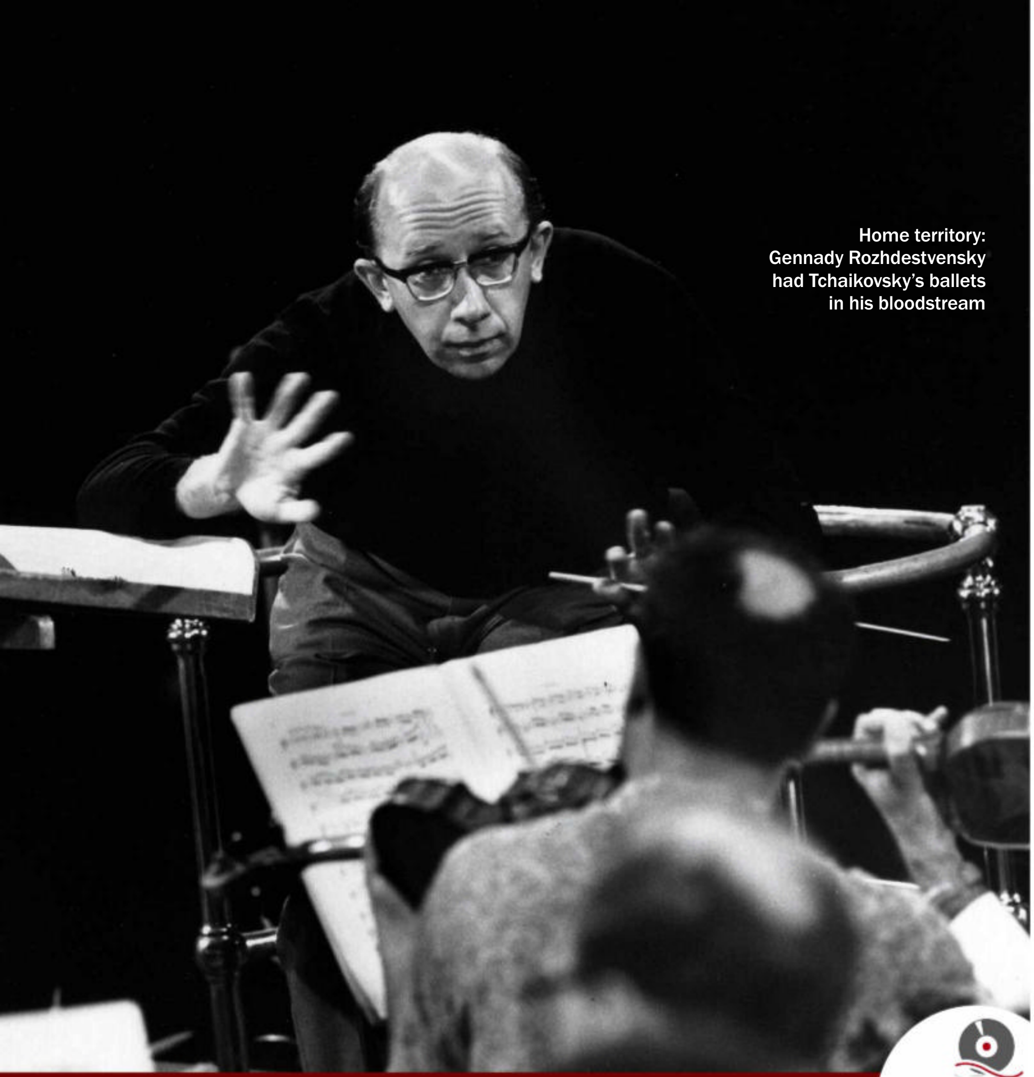
Writing the score was to prove the easy part. The premiere, which took place on 20 February 1877, was a disaster. Structurally and emotionally, the content of the ballet was so revolutionary that the Moscow ballerinas pronounced it undanceable. With only two rehearsals for the furiously virtuosic and lengthy orchestral parts, the results must have been at best approximate. The conductor, Stepan Ryabov, had never performed such a complicated score, and some orchestral parts were omitted. Costumes were purloined from another production and likened by one critic to an unoiled carriage being dragged around. The choreographer, Reisinger, was described as a lacklustre hack with no talent; the prima ballerina, Pelageya Karpakova, deemed a run-of the mill dancer past her prime. But the music was praised, and the ballet remained in the repertoire with 41 performances and three productions until 1884.

Although a master of composition, Tchaikovsky had much to learn about prima ballerinas – his swear box must have been overflowing as a result of their continual demands. Following the premiere, he had to include an extra pas-de-deux for Karpakova; the other ballerina, Anna Sobeshchanskaya, wanted a Russian dance. Some dances were subsequently deleted as unperformable, and replaced with music by other composers – a real patchwork that dilutes the carefully crafted structure. By the time the Mariinsky staged a famous revival in 1895 – two years after Tchaikovsky's death – with choreography by Marius Petipa, over a third of the music had been removed, and the company's house composer, Riccardo Drigo, had also added and orchestrated three numbers from Tchaikovsky's 18 Piano Pieces Op. 72. Unlike the original premiere, however, this production was a great success, with the ballerina Pierina Legnani famously doing 32 consecutive fouettés.

Although set as a fairy tale, the drama can sustain surprisingly different nuances, including Matthew Bourne's 1995 production which, with an all-male cast, looks at the repressive aspect of society in which the tormented Prince is expected to marry. Tchaikovsky's integrated symphonic elements, meanwhile, depart radically from the simpler structures of earlier ballets such as Adam's *Giselle*. Equally, the ballet orchestration and dance-like rhythms impacted on his symphonic works. His far-reaching developments paved the way for the revolutionary *Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky some 40 years later, and also influenced Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. It was a marvellously melodic game-changer.

Turn the page to discover our recommended recordings of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake

GETTY



Home territory: Gennady Rozhdestvensky had Tchaikovsky's ballets in his bloodstream

The best recording

A perfectly poised balletic balance

Gennady Rozhdestvensky *(conductor)*
USSR RTV Symphony Orchestra
Melodiya RCID24689058

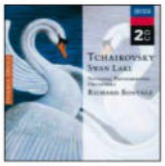
Numerous recordings by the good and the great ensure that the bar is set extremely high here, and among the many persuasive readings are those by Dmitry Yablonsky and the Russian State Symphony, Leonard Slatkin and the St Louis Symphony, Mark Ermler and the Royal Opera House Orchestra, and André Previn and the LSO. And in a more recent release, Vladimir Jurowski conducts the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia and adopts the 1877 world premiere version of the score, an impressive performance that is only let down by a patchy violin solo.

All the above succeed in highlighting the symphonic elements, which gives a surging cogency to the score. Rozhdestvensky adopts this approach, but brings both the balletic and the symphonic elements out, capturing the lightness of the scoring alongside fervent playing that depicts the theme of anguished love. The 1950s saw Rozhdestvenskyserve as director of the Bolshoi Opera, so this music is in his blood, and we are carried along in the page-turning narrative. In its remastered form, the 1969 sound is more than respectable, with marvellous playing from violinist Mikhail Chernyakhovsky in both Act I and Act III.

> Rozhdestvensky brings both the balletic and the symphonic elements out

This version includes the dances added for both Karpakova and Sobeshchanskaya (the Pas de Deux and Danse Russe) in the 1877 version. Because of the busy scenario, Act III is the most problematic, with numerous set dances, but Rozhdestvensky negotiates this with aplomb, bringing sharp characterisation. Most recordings, in fact, take the 1877 score (with the additions), although actual productions often use Petipa's choreography and the 1895 revisions. Tchaikovsky's original order is stronger, as it encompasses the carefully considered key schemes and thematic transformations.

Three other great recordings



Richard Bonynge *(conductor)*
Working in the theatre, notably opera houses in partnership with his wife, the soprano Joan Sutherland, informs Bonynge's approach. In this 1977 recording with the National Philharmonic Orchestra, the balletic elements are emphasised, with clearly defined light orchestration and rhythms – you can all but imagine the dancers. Mincho Minchev tackles the pearly violin solos with elegance, taking his time but not losing any vibrancy. Always the invention moves forward; intoxicating to the last note, the finale is as overwhelmingly moving as any other great recording. *(Decca E473 2832)*

Neeme Järvi *(conductor)*
The Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra is superlative in this 2013 recording, with conductor Järvi bringing a gloriously symphonic sweep to the score. Tempos are brisk, but the excitement and sense of through-composed cogency justify this. The trump card is the wonderfully honed and warm playing from violinist James Ehnes in the hugely exposed numbers, not least the Russian dance. The set dances are crisply defined and the passion burning. *(Chandos CHSA 5124 (2))*

Seiji Ozawa (conductor)

Ozawa's speeds are generally a little more relaxed than in other versions, but this doesn't diminish the sense of the forward momentum that the conductor generates so expertly in this 1979 recording. The Boston Symphony Orchestra is on brilliant form – there is a rollercoaster of burnished emotions coursing through the performance. What's more, Joseph Silverstein is eloquent in the knotty violin solos. Ozawa really draws you along in the drama and brings a sense of the theatre to the whole experience. *(Deutsche Grammophon 453 0552)*

And one to avoid...

None of the recordings I have listened to in the course of drawing up a shortlist are obvious ones to avoid, so do not disregard Mikhail Pletnev's 2010 recording with the Russian National Orchestra entirely out of hand. In fact, the orchestra's playing is highly virtuosic here, with the symphonic element very much to the fore as the waltzes have a rapid spring to them. But in Pletnev's hands, the introduction to Act I is a little slow compared to the performances by Rozhdestvensky, Järvi and Ozawa mentioned and, lacking some impetus, this set overall doesn't quite compel in the narrative with the same force.

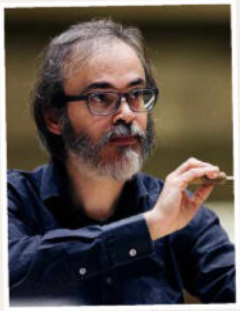
There are no metronome markings in the score, but tempo indications. Certain steps couldn't be done at the lick adopted by most of these conductors, yet without visual action, a degree of 'drive through' is necessary to keep the dramatic tension afloat, and Rozhdestvensky does this with masterful psychological insight and white-hot intensity. He brings the perfect array of emotions, depicting evil with menace, and purity with elegance – a duality that defines his approach, which he cloaks in human warmth and tenderness. You are hooked from the first note, and the finale is shatteringly powerful.

GETTY, ASTRID ACKERMANN

First-hand advice: Stravinsky works with dancers during a rehearsal of *The Fairy's Kiss*, 1937; (below) conductor Ilan Volkov

Continue the journey...

We suggest five more ballets to explore after Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake



The second, and longest, of ***Tchaikovsky***'s three ballets, *Sleeping Beauty* was first performed in St Petersburg in 1889. Again, the theme of good versus evil is to the fore, in the form of the characters Aurora and Carabosse, each represented by recurring leitmotifs. With the main story done and dusted by the end of Act II, Act III is effectively one extended wedding celebration. **(Orchestra of the Royal Opera House/Mark Ermler** *Sony 88697575302***)**

A month before the 1877 premiere of *Swan Lake*, Marius Petipa, the choreographer behind the work's famous 1895 revival, was in St Petersburg overseeing the first performance of *La Bayadère* by the Austrian composer ***Ludwig Minkus***. Set in ancient India, death by poisonous snake and opium-inspired dreams are all part of the action as the love between Nikiya, the temple dancer of the title, and the warrior Solor is thwarted by the jealous machinations of others. **(English Chamber Orchestra/Richard Bonynge** *Decca 436 9172***)**

Poison (though no snakes, surprisingly) also makes an appearance as Cleopatra calls the shots in *Egyptian Nights*, a one-act ballet by ***Anton Arensky***, first staged in 1900. Strongly influenced by Tchaikovsky, Arensky also adds oriental colour aplenty as he relates the story of a hunter who has the misfortune to fall for the Egyptian queen's legendary beauty. **(Moscow SO/Dmitry Yablonsky** *Naxos 8.573633***)**

But back to Marius Petipa, who was also the choreographer of ***Glazunov***'s three-act ballet *Raymonda*, first performed in St Petersburg in January 1898. To cut a long story short, Raymonda, a Hungarian countess, eagerly awaits the return of her beloved crusader knight, Jean de Brienne, but in the meantime has to deal with the unwanted advances of the Saracen Abderakhman. And as with Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, Act III is devoted to nuptial jollity. **(Bolshoi Theatre Symphony Orchestra/Yevgeny Svetlanov** *Denon 19643***)**

Now fast forward to 1928, when ***Stravinsky*** paid homage to Tchaikovsky with his one-act ballet *The Fairy's Kiss*, whose score contains a number of the older composer's own melodies. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ice Maiden*, Stravinsky's work shows a gossamer touch and sense of drama worthy of his great predecessor. **(BBC Scottish SO/Ilan Volkov** *Hyperion CDA67697***)**

Stravinsky shows a gossamer touch worthy of his great predecessor

Reviews

Recordings and books rated by expert critics

Welcome

If you want to hear the haunting grandeur of Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* perfectly paired with the tragedy of *Kindertotenlieder*, look no further than our Recording of the Month, where Anna Lucia Richter makes a stunning orchestral record debut with the Gürzenich-Orchester Köln and Jordan de Souza. Elsewhere, Dobrinka Tabakova's richly textured *Sun Triptych* traces the shifting light of day; Véronique Gens's *Les Divas d'Offenbach* offers a witty tribute to the composer's stars and, in Book Reviews, Edward Brooke-Hitching's *The Madman's Orchestra* delivers an irresistibly eccentric history of music. Terry Blain's Christmas round-up raises a glass with Ensemble Altera's luminous *Feminine Voices at Christmas*, Miró Quartet's *Hearth* and more.
Miranda Bardsley *Reviews editor*

This month's critics

John Allison, Nicholas Anderson, Miranda Bardsley, Terry Blain, Garry Booth, Geoff Brown, Michael Church, Christopher Cook, Martin Cotton, Christopher Dingle, Misha Donat, Jessica Duchen, Rebecca Franks, George Hall, Malcolm Hayes, Claire Jackson, Michael Jameson, Stephen Johnson, John-Pierre Joyce, Nicholas Kenyon, Ashutosh Khandekar, Erik Levi, Natasha Loges, Andrew McGregor, Freya Parr, Ingrid Pearson, Jeremy Pound, Anthony Pryer, Paul Riley, Suzanne Rolt, Jan Smaczny, Charlotte Smith, Jo Talbot, Anne Templer, Roger Thomas, Sarah Urwin Jones, Kate Wakeling, Alexandra Wilson

KEY TO STAR RATINGS

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Excellent
★★★	Good
★★	Disappointing
★	Poor

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

A vivid and intimate portrait of Mahler

Anna Lucia Richter brings striking depth and expressive insight to the composer's song-settings, writes ***Malcolm Hayes***

MAHLER
SONGS OF FATE
ANNA LUCIA RICHTER

Mahler

Songs of Fate
Anna Lucia Richter (mezzo-soprano), Gürzenich-Orchester Köln/Jordan de Souza
Myrios Classics MYR036
55:28 mins

The booklet accompanying this remarkable release begins with a short interview with Anna Lucia Richter. She all at once pins down the conundrum of how to approach Mahler's song-settings from the folk anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn): 'They demand naturalness'. Indeed, and how does a highly trained concert singer capture that, which in its way is in opposition to the artistic sophistication that's also required?

Richter engages happily with the paradox. Her mezzo-soprano voice is impressively true and sure, ranging from a dusky low register to a lovely way with floating high notes, and a beautiful range of shades and colours to conjure the music's shifting range of moods. One interpretation after another comes across unerringly, from the Schubert-like charm of 'Rheinlegendchen' (Little Rhine Legend) to the melting poignancy of 'Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen' (Where the lovely Trumpets sound – an image of death and beyond).

While some of Mahler's humorous settings today can't help sounding a touch arch, Richter opts for deftness rather than exaggeration, in this way exactly capturing the wry irony of 'Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt' (St Anthony's Sermon to the Fishes).

Meanwhile Mahler's wondrous orchestrations are delivered at state-of-the-art level by the Gürzenich-Orchester Köln. The principal horn and trumpet players are exceptional; and at every point, Jordan de Souza's conducting is a masterclass in how to conjure

BBC music MAGAZINE CHOICE

Voice of fate: Anna Lucia Richter brings Mahler song-settings to life

JULIA WESELY

one haunting musical moment after another without getting in the way.

But if this level of music-making is something special, Richter's delivery of *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) comes from another dimension altogether. Mahler began this cycle when his two daughters were not yet born; while Friedrich Rückert's poems had been written after the death of two of his children, it's more likely that Mahler, one of the oldest of 14 siblings, was remembering having witnessed the deaths of eight of these while he was growing up.

As Richter says: 'In Mahler's music, there is always a sense of hoping for the hereafter… [And] if we couldn't express our pain, that would just make things worse.' And about performing the music: 'If I ever forgot that I am playing a quasi-theatrical role, then the *Kindertotenlieder* would probably tear me apart.'

> Richter's delivery of *Kindertotenlieder* seems to come from another dimension

The music's emotional charge here is indeed so powerful that it can often seem to be not fully realisable in performance. Richter's response upends any such expectation: her identification with the songs and their subject-matter appears total, and the artistic result both mesmerises and disturbs the listener.

One particular moment must stand for countless others – the final line of the second of the five songs, where the children are imagined as saying: 'Look straight at us, because soon we will be far away! What to you are only eyes in these days, in the nights to come will be only stars.' Richter floats the last word, 'Sterne', with a poise and beauty that seem supernatural. This is as near great singing as makes no difference. ★★★★★

Performer's notes
Anna Lucia Richter

How did *Songs of Fate* first take shape for you?
For about 10 years, I've dreamed of recording an orchestral album. Mahler was always high on my list: his music allows me to combine the grandeur of the orchestra with art song. I also wanted to record something that had matured on stage over time. I've sung Mahler's *Wunderhorn* songs with conductors like Bernard Haitink, Teodor Currentzis and Vasily Petrenko. The *Kindertotenlieder* are performed less often, but their beauty is extraordinary. Performing them with Iván Fischer, I felt how naturally they belong alongside the more folk-inspired *Wunderhorn* songs.

How does working with an orchestra reshape your approach to this repertoire?
Mahler often composed at the piano, but I'm sure he always heard the orchestra in his mind, his music is so descriptive. But recording with an orchestra poses entirely new challenges. There are as many possible mistakes as people involved and, as a soloist, I must deliver on the spot. It almost feels like a live concert.

What was it like working with Jordan de Souza and the Gürzenich-Orchester Köln?
I met Jordan de Souza while performing Offenbach's *La Périchole*, and I loved how freely I could sing; he conducted as if playing the piano. He truly understands song, which made him ideal for this album. The Gürzenich-Orchester Köln has been part of my life from the start – my father is one of its violinists and his colleagues remember me playing with dolls backstage as a child! After 20 years of making music together, there were no better partners for this project.

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Christmas

Terry Blain tunes in to some of the very best seasonal releases of this year

Christmas round-up

Sir John Rutter turned 80 this year, and ***All the Stars Looked Down*** is ***The Choir of King's College, Cambridge***'s salute to Rutter's lifetime achievement as a composer of choral music. Rutter favourites such as *Dormi, Jesu*, *Nativity Carol* and *All Bells in Paradise* receive radiant performances under Daniel Hyde's highly sympathetic direction, with the Britten Sinfonia adding warm-textured accompaniments. A tranche of pieces arranged by Rutter is featured, including Adam's evergreen *O Holy Night* (with eloquent tenor solo by Matthew Supramaniam), and a lush take on Gruber's *Silent Night*, with sprinklings of Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* in the orchestration. *(King's College KGS0075)* ★★★★

String quartets don't normally release Christmas albums, but the ***Miró Quartet*** is making an exception. The group asked 15 composers to set 'any holiday tune they wanted' for the quartet format, and the results are fascinatingly varied. Clarice Assad's *In Dulci Jubilo* makes for an appropriately buoyant opener, while Michi Wiancko's *Jingle Bells* effervesces with playful pizzicato stylings. The shimmering tremolando snowscape Alex Berko summons for *In the Bleak Midwinter* is another highlight, as is Hyung-ki Joo's pot-pourri of over 20 seasonal tunes in *Songs of Christmas Past*, where the Miró Quartet get to sing a little too. The playing is superbly fresh and communicative. *(Pentatone PTC5187495)* ★★★★★

O Holy Night is the second album ***Christopher Gray*** has made since taking over as director of music at St John's College, Cambridge in 2023. It captures the St John's Choir in wholesome fettle, in a range of Christmas-related pieces. Central to the album is Poulenc's *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël*, which receives an expressively shaped performance. The choir's mixed-voice treble section takes centre stage in an evocative rendition of Errollyn Wallen's *Peace on Earth*, and shines in the multi-layered upper voice parts of Jonathan Dove's setting of *The Three Kings*. *(Signum SIGCD913)* ★★★★

Much of the music we listen to at Christmas is familiar, so it's refreshing to veer off the beaten track, here with ***Christmas at the Bethlehem of the West***. ***Alessandro Scarlatti***'s *Messa per il Santissimo Natale* was written in 1707, to celebrate Christmas at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, but is rarely performed now. It's a vibrantly uplifting piece, scored for nine voices with string and organ accompaniment, and laced with contrapuntal patterns. Giovanni Giorgi's *Messa per la notte di Natale*, also written for the Basilica, is the main coupling. Both works receive spry performances from the Coro e Orchestra Ghislieri, with Giulio Prandi conducting. *(Arcana A587)* ★★★★

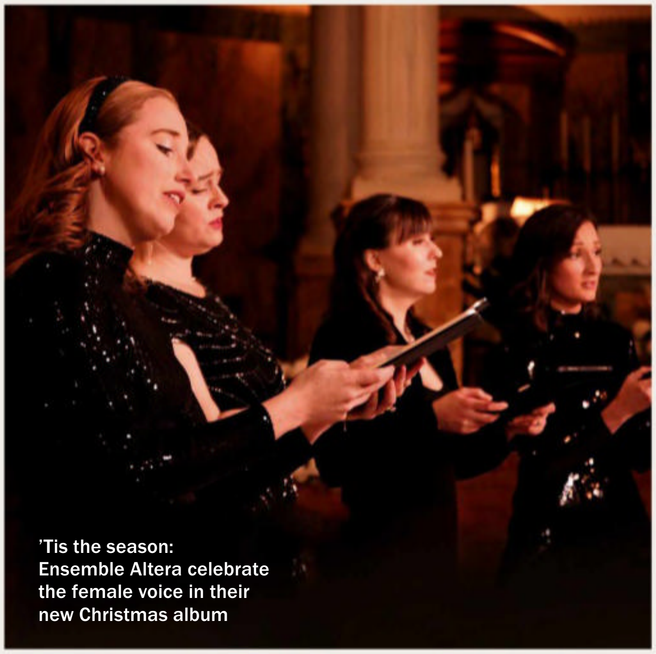
On Christmas Night is ***London Choral Sinfonia***'s second Christmas album, and majors on freshly-made arrangements of favourite carols. Bob Chilcott's recasting of *Silent Night* and *Away in a Manger* combines novel harmonisations with softly-voiced string accompaniments, while Owain Park's refurbishment of *O Holy Night* sports a solo verse from soprano Emma Bell and intricate part-writing for the choir. Park's spruced-up *Ding Dong! Merrily on High* has a punchy choral contribution capped by gleaming trumpet carillons. Malakai Bayoh is the eloquent treble soloist in Howard Blake's *Walking in the Air*, in Blake's own stirring arrangement. *(Orchid Classics ORC100402)* ★★★★

KEVIN EIKENBERG

CHRISTMAS CHOICE

Sparkling choral gems

Terry Blain is wowed by this radiant Christmas collection from Ensemble Altera



'Tis the season: Ensemble Altera celebrate the female voice in their new Christmas album

Feminine Voices at Christmas

Works by Hildegard von Bingen, Imogen Holst, Gustav Holst, Marsh, Britten et al

Ensemble Altera/Christopher Lowrey

Alpha Classics ALPHA1182 74:23 mins

The exquisitely pure-toned performance of Hildegard von Bingen's *O viridissima, Virga* at the outset makes clear that this will be a special recital. The choir in question is the Rhode Island-based Ensemble Altera, a flexible chamber grouping directed by countertenor Christopher Lowrey, whose programme aims to embrace 'the many enthralling possibilities of the feminine voice'. Thirteen singers are used for the recording, with all of the pieces either composed or arranged for soprano and alto voices. At the heart of the album is Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, an early version of which (as Lowrey points out in his excellent booklet essay) was premiered by a female choir. It's a luminous interpretation, with wonderfully precise ensemble and a buoyant sense of rhythm, and Lishan Tan's delicately sentient harp playing as accompaniment. Works by eight female composers are featured, including a crystalline account of Elizabeth Poston's *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, Joanna Marsh's ringing *Magnificat* and Barbara Strozzi's meltingly lyrical *O Maria quam pulchra es*. Christopher Lowrey elicits expressively nuanced singing of the highest quality throughout, and the sound is excellent. ★★★★★

Orchestral

ORCHESTRAL CHOICE

Capturing light and time in sound

Erik Levi praises Dobrinka Tabakova's vivid and compelling orchestral writing

Dobrinka Tabakova
Sun Triptych

Dobrinka Tabakova

Sun Triptych

Maxim Rysanov, Dasol Kim, Roman Mints et al; BBC Concert Orchestra/ Dobrinka Tabakova

ECM 4878558 64:61 mins

This is the second ECM disc to feature the extremely accessible music of Bulgarian-born English composer, Dobrinka Tabakova. As before, it highlights works written for instrumentalists, such as violinist Roman Mints, violist Maxim Rysanov and cellist Kristina Blaumane, with whom Tabakova has been closely associated for many years.

Tabakova allows her aural imagination to take flight

Such long-standing musical partnerships guarantee that the performances in this recording are authoritative. As to the music, I particularly liked the easy-going charm of the *Suite in Jazz Style* composed for Rysanov, who is ably partnered here by pianist Dasol Kim.

Another tangible connection between the two ECM discs is the inclusion of a number of works for string orchestra, a medium which Tabakova exploits with rich and imaginative sonorities that often allude to music of the past. For instance, in *Organum Light*, a work originally composed for five singers, Tabakova pays tribute to the viol consort music of Gibbons and Purcell, but also invokes an almost Vaughan Williams-like sequence of modal harmonies.

A more subtle allusion is realised in *Fantasy Homage to Schubert*, where the opening theme of the Austrian master's *Fantasy* for violin and piano suddenly emerges from a sequence of tremolando textures, almost as if floating disembodied in space.

Perhaps the most engaging work in this recital is the *Sun Triptych*, a three-movement nature piece for violin, cello and strings that traces the movement of light from dawn to dusk. Here, Tabakova allows her aural imagination to take flight, and in the process of that, conjures up a wealth of fascinating and evocative sounds. ★★★★★

In the sun: Dobrinka Tabakova crafts evocative soundworlds

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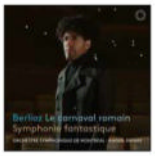
Berlioz

Le carnaval romain; Symphonie fantastique

Orchestre symphonique de Montréal/Rafael Payare

Pentatone PTC5187413 62:45 mins



In a liner note observation Rafael Payare confesses that, beyond the narrative thrust, what particularly attracts him to the *Symphonie fantastique* is the sheer virtuosity of Berlioz's orchestral imagination. And in this latest addition to the symphony's already capacious discography, it's the sounds he conjures that mark this recording out. It's not that Payare doesn't 'get' the dynamics of a symphony in which autobiography and fantasy collide, but his rigorous control sometimes militates against the sheer abandon of some of Berlioz's wilder imaginings. There's no need to hide quaking behind the sofa during the Witches Sabbath! Its menace owes more to Payare's controlling incisive grip than to technicolour *Grand Guignol*, and the combination of the Dies Irae chant with the witches' dance perhaps ultimately registers as a taut musical rather than dramatic device.

There's plenty of ravishing playing to be sure. Payare sculpts the opening of 'Rêveries-Passions' without surrendering to indulgence, and the winds are particularly silky. Shot through with glitterball harps 'Un Bal' is elegant and suavely Gallic. Chaste, too, despite the 19th century reputation of the waltz – not to mention Payare's restoration of the cornet Berlioz banished from the published score.

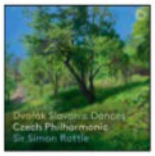
Carefully calibrated niceties such as the distanced dialogue between cor anglais and oboe as the slow movement announces itself are scrupulously handled within a seductively blended orchestral soundscape. But a few rough edges wouldn't go amiss. Bassoons and brass are perhaps a little too polite in the 'Marche Au Supplice' when set alongside the gloriously fruity rasping of Les Siècle's period instruments for François-Xavier Roth on Harmonia Mundi. Engagingly light on its feet, *Carnaval romain* completes a Berlioz 'double' with plenty to commend it, Payare's fastidious caution notwithstanding. *Paul Riley* ★★★★

Dvořák

Slavonic Dances

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Sir Simon Rattle

Pentatone PTC5187414 71:06 mins



Any prospect of experiencing Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* played by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra is instantly alluring. Sir Simon Rattle's new Pentatone recording of the complete Op. 46 and 72 sets with this great orchestra affords countless inducements, making these spirited and insightful accounts altogether unmissable.

Characteristically serious in approach, Rattle might not seem an obvious candidate for plaudits in music like this. But from first note to last, his dazzlingly impulsive and brilliant performances seem winningly uncontrived. An invigorating lack of artifice always lets the music speak fully on its own terms, and Rattle has that rare gift of never getting in its way.

The recording itself, made in the famous Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum, Prague, is equally remarkable, offering spectacular dynamic range and thrilling spatial realism, perhaps only matched, though never bettered, by Jiří Bělohlávek's Decca version with this orchestra. Ear-catching textural detailing reveals the true genius of Dvořák's orchestration of pieces, which began life as piano works and were transformed at the canny instigation of the Berlin publisher Simrock, who immediately sensed their universal appeal.

Bělohlávek's survey shares a direct historical lineage with vintage Supraphon recordings from Czech greats like Neumann, Talich and Šejna, and so one might reasonably conclude that an established performing tradition exists in the case of these dances. But while each of these notable conductors clearly had strong individual views about how this music should be presented, Rattle often seems consistently more engaging, natural and bucolic than any of them. Highly recommended. *Michael Jameson* ★★★★★

Gunning

Symphonies Nos 8 & 9
BBC National Orchestra of Wales/
Kenneth Woods
Signum SIGCD949 67:33 mins

There is something distinctively wriggling and eel-like about Christopher Gunning's concert music. Brief motifs are repeated and metamorphosed without ever fully forming any sustained harmonic chain or melodic line. Moods within sections are equally changeable, as darting and athletic as the mercurial solo spots for brass and woodwinds, high and low. It's a manner of working purposefully different from the simpler tactics the late British composer deployed in his earlier commercial assignments: TV advertisements, incidental music for screens big and small.

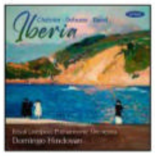
The symphonies here – two from the 13 completed between 2001 and 2020 – follow the musical style already familiar from the nine symphonies previously recorded. Influences and godfathers aren't hard to find (Malcolm Arnold, Sibelius, a dash of Walton), though the Gunning trademarks loom much larger, particularly in the more expansive Ninth (2016).

Its overall mode might be quasi-pastoral, but nothing here is simply bucolic. Leading motifs can be jaggedly athletic, the slow movement is doleful, the scurrying scherzo nervous, and climactic fortissimo chords tend to serve more as question marks than full stops. The Eighth (2015) follows a similar pattern, though in more abbreviated form. In both cases, Gunning writes with pleasing economy: neither symphony carries any spare fat.

Kenneth Woods is the perfect conductor for this maverick, semi-conservative British fare, and the musicians of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales revel in all the chances Gunning gives them for colourfully eloquent instrumental displays. *Geoff Brown* ★★★★

Iberia

Works by Chabrier, Debussy and Ravel
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra/Domingo Hindoyan
Onyx ONYX4252 72:08 mins



This is Spain through French eyes and ears. The two countries may share a border, but, for French artists and composers of the Belle Époque, Spain was an enthralling land with a frisson of exoticism. While Bizet's *Carmen* exemplifies this fascination on the operatic stage, this vibrantly played new disc from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and their chief conductor Domingo Hindoyan explores orchestral representations of the Iberian peninsula.

Ravel's music accounts for more than half of the disc, a reflection of his Basque heritage, whereas Debussy never set foot in the country, yet, in Manuel de Falla's view, his *Ibéria* captured its essence in music. Opening the disc, though, is a wonderfully spritely performance of *España*, Chabrier's musical souvenir from travelling around Spain with his wife. As with Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso* and the opening 'Par les rues' of Debussy's *Ibéria*, the RLPO dance with a combination of grace and snap, while a sense of latent energy permeates elsewhere, bursting forth with panache in 'Le matin d'un jour de fête' even if the conclusion is curiously underplayed.

The seductive heart of the disc is Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*. There could be more sultry haze at the outset, but it soon heats up with tantalising woodwind and some deliciously flicked string slides in the 'Malaguena' and 'Habanera'. *Pavane pour une infante défunte* is teasingly languid in Hindoyan's hands, while *Boléro* is driven relatively briskly.

Whatever their merits, the context within the programme makes this pair seem unusually ordinary. They may be Ravel's best-known Spanish-inspired works, but the sounds, sights and smells brought to life by the preceding musical portraits provide more vivid Iberian evocations. *Christopher Dingle* ★★★★

Making an impression: Domingo Hindoyan captures the essence of Chabrier, Debussy and Ravel

CHELSEA LAUREN

Journeyism

Works by Lenny White and Timothy Kennedy Adams Jr.
NYU Percussion Ensemble; NYU Orchestra/Jonathan Haas et al
CRD CRD3552 43:30 mins

Journeyism is not yet a fully recognised word, and with luck it won't ever become one. It is impossible, however, to be similarly negative about the surface attractions of *Journeyism* itself, an album from Britain's re-invigorated independent label CRD, recorded in astonishingly vivid recorded sound, featuring hearteningly vigorous performances from New York University student musicians. Whether the music itself is welcomed so warmly partly depends on whether the listener believes that this album's goals – musically championing people of colour, expressing their struggles and the need for community change – matter more than the quality of the music alone.

Following the past history of musical propaganda, most of the meaning of two of the pieces derives not from the notes but the declaimed texts: the narrative of the 19th century abolitionist Harriet Tubman, almost always the top sound layer in *Harriet: Journey to Freedom*; the pointed selection of words spoken in 2020 at the scene of the crime during the originally reported eight minutes and 46 seconds that George Floyd's neck lay under a policeman's boot. Stripped of its sound collage, *8:46* would seem just random sprays of percussive shake, rattle and roll. Harriet's musical quotient is stronger but still remains subservient to Sydney Williams' emotional narration.

Only jazz fusion drummer Lenny White's pieces rely on music alone: pleasurably so in *The Magnificent Seven*, his personal salute to seven jazz drummers, but quite the reverse in the galumphing din of *The Journey*. All the works are agreeably short. *Geoff Brown* ★★★

Nielsen

Symphony No. 6; Commotio (Arr. by Hans Abrahamsen)
Royal Academy of Music Soloists Ensemble/Ryan Wigglesworth
Linn CKD762 58:38 mins

Nielsen aficionados are evidently completists at heart. Symphony cycles on disc abound! Even so they might want to pursue this new recording of the Sixth (released to mark the symphony's centenary). Not only is Nielsen's symphonic swansong performed in Hans Abrahamsen's revelatory rescoring for 18 instruments, but the coupling also juxtaposes Nielsen's actual compositional swansong: the organ *Commotio*, heard in Abrahamsen's 2012 orchestral respray. Composed under the impress of the great Dietrich Buxtehude (and generally the contrapuntal predilections of the Baroque) – it reflects an intensification of the linear impetus that had underpinned the symphony a few years earlier.

Hearing the two works side by side is instructive. *Commotio*'s earnest, densely worked gravitas is the perfect foil to the symphony's multi-faceted gear changes. And illuminating too is Abrahamsen's reimagining, which, nodding to the Baroque, in the case of *Commotio* even incorporates 18th-century style natural horns and trumpets.

The young 'Academicians' under Ryan Wigglesworth are on irrepressible form, responding with ever-alert playing, at once fresh, buoyant and supremely focused. Wigglesworth juggles spry affability with expansive backward glances in the symphony's first movement; and the 'Humoreske' for winds and percussion alone emerges by turn ironic and subversive. His surefooted unfolding of the finale's theme and variations gives notice that the *Commotio* will be in safe hands, and so it proves to round off a disc no admirer of Nielsen will want to be without. *Paul Riley* ★★★★

Rachmaninov • Elgar

Rachmaninov: The Bells;
Elgar: Falstaff
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Vasily Petrenko
Harmonia Mundi HMM902788
72:35 mins

Rachmaninoff
The Bells
Elgar
Falstaff
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Vasily Petrenko

Rachmaninov and Elgar might not be the most obvious pairing but, as conductor Vasily Petrenko contends in his introduction, they are an illuminating one. Not least when it comes to the two 'deeply personal' masterpieces, both written in 1913 and premiered in the dying days of global peace in 1914. Together, on this excellent recording, the first of the RPO and Petrenko's for Harmonia Mundi, these two pieces are the last embers of romanticism, telling the story of worlds about to disappear.

Rachmaninov's lifelong obsession with bells, which were, for him, the sound of his childhood and of old Russia, is given full expression in his choral symphony inspired by Edgar Allan Poe. Petrenko is in his element here – and so too is the Philharmonia Chorus, particularly electrifying when unleashed at full tilt in the 'Alarm Bells' movement. The playful, wintry magic of 'The Silver Sleigh Bells', is enchantingly caught, and tenor Pavel Petrov dives in with gusto. The RPO's strings find generous warmth in the luscious, somnolent writing of 'The Mellow Wedding Bells', with Mirjam Mesak the steely soprano soloist. And in the 'Mournful Iron Bells', it's hard to imagine a more mournful cor anglais solo, or a more sepulchral baritone in Andrii Kymach.

Elgar's *Falstaff* is a rich portrait of Shakespeare's portly knight, whose escapades include, among other things, robbery, drowning his sorrows, battle and banishment by King Hal. Petrenko's view has admirable pace and energy, and if it doesn't at first quite catch light, the excitement and tension pick up throughout, and he is entirely home in the Gloucestershire scenes. It's a performance well worth hearing. *Rebecca Franks* ★★★★

Stöhr

Orchestral Music, Vol. Four – Chamber Symphony in F Major
Sinfonia Varsovia/Ian Hobson
Toccata Classics TOCC 0766 50:49 mins

Richard STÖHR

In his heyday in Vienna, from the mid 1910s to the 1930s, Richard Stöhr was revered more as a teacher of music theory than as a composer, counting Karajan, Leinsdorf and Rodzinski among many distinguished pupils, not to mention a young Marlene Dietrich. All this came to an end when, as a Jew, he was driven from his teaching posts in 1939 and escaped to the United States where, for many years, he led a financially precarious existence. Nevertheless, he attracted some remarkable students including a young Leonard Bernstein.

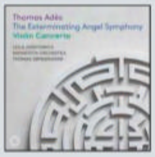
Stöhr's music shows him to have been an unashamed conservative untouched by the modernist innovations erupting around him. His Chamber Symphony, for a nonet comprising string quartet, oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and harp, was composed in 1912 as a centenary tribute to Vienna's musical society, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, and throughout upholds the virtues of classical romanticism. Much of the first movement, initiated by a bracingly pastoral main melody, is a delight and, although substantial, does not outstay its welcome. The march-like *Andante* is attractive, but unfortunately the scherzo and finale don't really live up to their openings.

The performance, with full string orchestra rather than solo quartet, is committed. Ian Hobson directs with a clear sense of direction and real care over phrasing and articulation. The wind playing is accomplished, but the string ensemble is not always as unanimous as it might be. Even so, this estimable recording will certainly delight connoisseurs of the 19th century's romantic twilight. *Jan Smaczny* ★★★★

BRIEF NOTES

Adès The Exterminating Angel Symphony; Violin Concerto

Leila Josefowicz; Minnesota Orchestra/Thomas Søndergård
Pentatone PTC 5187 487 39 mins



Thomas Adès is a composer with the capacity to seduce and terrify in equal measure – and both extremes are in evidence on this captivating album. *The Exterminating Angel Symphony* juxtaposes queasily swooping chords and relentlessly bombastic brass with anguished strings, while in the Violin Concerto, Leila Josefowicz is raw and edgy, never afraid to make harsh sounds at the music's behest. *Charlotte Smith* ★★★★

Vogler Scala Symphony; Overtures

Munich Radio Orchestra/Howard Griffiths *CPO 555373-2 57 mins*

Don't expect to have your emotions tugged this way and that; do expect to emerge with a broad grin on your face. A contemporary of Haydn, the German Georg Joseph Vogler was evidently blessed with a similarly good-spirited disposition. Though not a festive work, the brief, chirpy 'Scala' Symphony includes references to the carol *Resonet in laudibus*, while the various overtures are packed with character, colour and no little humour. *Jeremy Pound* ★★★★

The French in Spain Works by Debussy, Ibert, Ravel

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra/JoAnn Falletta *Naxos 8.574615 57 mins*

THE FRENCH IN SPAIN
DEBUSSY
IBERT
RAVEL

This album finds the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and JoAnn Falletta in brilliant form, presenting an exquisitely curated programme of lush French works inspired by Spain. Bringing together the masters of impressionism, it includes Debussy's shimmering *Images for Orchestra* and Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* – music that, in performances like these, never loses its magic. The orchestra's colourful delivery and rhythmic precision are exceptional throughout, but for me Ravel's *Miroirs* is the real highlight, its Spanish-inflected verve full of flair. *Miranda Bardsley* ★★★★★

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Concerto

CONCERTO CHOICE

CHANDOS
WALTON
CELLO CONCERTO
SYMPHONY NO. 1 · SCAPINO
Jonathan Aasgaard
John Wilson

Walton's exquisite colours brought vibrantly to life

John Wilson's Sinfonia of London is virtuosic and eloquent in vital orchestral works, writes *Jo Talbot*

Clear and expressive: Jonathan Aasgaard records Walton's Cello Concerto

ALEXANDER JAMES

Walton

Cello Concerto; Symphony No.1; Scapino
Jonathan Aasgaard (cello); Sinfonia of London/
John Wilson
Chandos CHSA5328 76:38 mins

A fervent romantic liaison with Baroness Doernberg inspired Walton's First Symphony, passion and intensity coursing beneath the surface of its brilliant invention. Yet the structure and textures are carefully constructed, the last movement, in particular, proving tricky to complete.

> In John Wilson's hands, Walton's Ravelian timbres shimmer and glisten

The composer's trademark calling card is an ability to create exquisite colours, cast in the Ravelian tradition, the textures also owing much to Sibelius. In John Wilson's hands, these timbres shimmer and glisten. He has already proved himself to be masterful in this repertoire; his ear for balancing lines coupled with scrupulous attention to detail seals the deal. The intricacy of the score is bequeathed tremendous lucidity, and pungency in the rhythmically defined motives, the *Presto con Malizia* a particular tour-de-force of orchestral brilliance.

Both *Scapino* and the Cello Concerto were premiered by American orchestras, and the virtuosity of their ensembles encouraged Walton to go to town with timbres. The opening of the Cello Concerto is the perfect example, with striking vibraphone chords followed by viola trills. The sublimely mystic cello melody then soars above – a mesmerising passage that is eloquently depicted by Jonathan Aasgaard. Wilson is supreme is shading the orchestra to complement the cello line, both clear and expressive. In both cadenzas, Aasgaard draws a dramatically compelling narrative, again coupling precision with nuance and aplomb.

The *commedia dell arte* figure of *Scapino* is reflected in virtuosic orchestral figures. The roller-coaster music charges forth, Wilson offering crystal-clear articulation, solo figures perfectly etched from the stellar soloists in the Sinfonia of London. ★★★★★

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Mozart

Concertone K190; Horn Concerto No. 3, K447; Piano Concertos Nos 2, K39 & 4 K41
Veriko & Sofiko Tchumburidze, Pascal Deuber et al; ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien, Mozarteum Orchester Salzburg/ Howard Griffiths
Alpha Classics ALPHA1160 68:08 mins

Showcasing emerging young soloists in Mozart concertos might seem like a profitable venture for any record label. But here, as Alpha's continuing project reaches its 13th instalment, it becomes harder than ever to see how this particular series will fully live up to the sum of its parts.

Much the best playing here comes from an outstanding young horn player, Pascal Deuber, who is shortly to assume the post of principal horn with the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich. His agreeably rounded tone and impressive technical agility lends both charisma and distinction to this finely sculpted account of the K447 Horn Concerto.

Giorgi Gigashvili, a young pianist from Tbilisi, plays adequately at best in two very early Mozart Piano Concertos K39 and K41. But with little tangible feeling for Classical semantics or structural cohesion evident, it falls to conductor Howard Griffiths to make most of the running time here. Gigashvili's accounts tend to suggest a work in progress rather than any convincing absorption in the task at hand, and these performances disappoint.

Lastly, Mozart's C major Concertone for two violins (1774) features two Georgian sisters, Veriko and Sofiko Tchumburidze as principal soloists. Both still need to develop persuasive Mozartian sensibility and finesse and are outclassed by their obligato oboe and cello partners (both are principal players in the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra); this performance is relieved only by Howard Griffiths's supportive and intelligent conducting. Proof positive, again, of the late lamented Alfred Brendel's mantra, that, 'In Mozart, people try too hard, and then again, not really hard enough!' *Michael Jameson* ★★

Ravel

Piano Concertos

Nelson Goerner (piano); Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo/ Kazuki Yamada

Alpha Classics ALPHA1162 62:24 mins

Ravel's music is written with such sureness of purpose, with supreme technical precision to match, that it's more or less impossible – at the level of full-on professional skill that's necessary anyway – to execute it badly. Yet a truly successful way with its idiom – super-refined on the surface, with deep wells of expression just below – can also be elusive. Nelson Goerner's high-powered keyboard mastery is self-evident in the panache of his interpretations here; and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo does more than justice to the dazzling sounds of Ravel's instrumentation. Yet their collective approach to the G major Piano Concerto comes across as somehow miscued. The quick outer movements are taken with a big-boned verve that misses the music's finesse and sparkle. And in the long piano solo that memorably begins the *Adagio assai* central movement, Goerner deploys a slight but insistent tempo-bending, expression-searching manner that subverts the unaffected naturalness of the moment.

The same quality of artistic over-extraction mars Goerner's otherwise fine playing of the two solo works that fill out this release. Major upside arrives, however, in a superlative interpretation of the Left Hand Piano Concerto, whose super-rhetorical style is the G Major Concerto's polar opposite. In the slow opening and closing sections of the work's single movement, Goerner's playing – sweepingly impressive in both solo piano cadenzas – and Yamada's conducting together remarkably capture the music's brand of exultant grandeur. And the momentum of the quick and jazzy central section builds in spectacular style. *Malcolm Hayes* ★★★

Vivaldi

Opus 8 Vol. 2

La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Signum Classics SIGCD919 80:58 mins

Although Vivaldi's collection of concertos published in Amsterdam by Le Cène as his Opus 8 is most famous for the *Four Seasons*, the set contains 12 concertos in all. It is perhaps brave to issue a recording without the Famous Four, but La Serenissima has already issued its Vivaldi 8 Vol. 1, so this Vol. 2 is a natural successor: it has the six concertos of the *libro secondo* plus a couple of others, making a generously filled disc.

Enthusiasts of La Serenissima will need no encouragement to acquire these brilliant, sturdy performances, led by the tireless virtuosity of leader Adrian Chandler. If my reaction is slightly more guarded, that's only because we have had such superb Vivaldi in recent times that these performances, for all their use of period instruments, can sometimes sound a little old fashioned.

Chandler's own playing (joined by Oliver Cave as soloist in RV 512) is absolutely clear and very poised, moulding Vivaldi's repetitive figurations while not avoiding vibrato in the search for expressiveness. There are programmatic allusions in 'La Caccia' (RV 362) and the outstanding G minor Concerto (RV 332) has some surreal cross-string writing; however, the central movements of these concertos are taken at a sober pace that fails to lift them, and the full ensemble sound with chugging double bass is heavy and sustained in a way that recalls much earlier Vivaldi performances.

I recognise that it is maybe just my taste that prefers the glassy, more transparent sounds of a Rachel Podger or a Fabio Biondi, but that is where I would first go for spine-tingling accounts of these effervescent concertos. *Nicholas Kenyon* ★★★

Grace Williams

Violin Concerto; Elegy for string orchestra; Sinfonia Concertante for Piano & Orchestra

Geneva Lewis (violin), Clare Hammond (piano); BBC National Orchestra of Wales/ Jaime Martín, Ryan Bancroft, Jac van Steen

Lyrita SRCD-447 59:09 mins

The Violin Concerto was recorded at a Prom in 2023, and it's a concentrated performance, with a strong sense of the impassioned lyricism of the opening movement. It was composed in 1949-50, by which time Williams had absorbed the influence of her teacher Vaughan Williams, and tempered it with something more Teutonic learned from Egon Wellesz in Vienna – I hear echoes of the Korngold Concerto here. Williams's roots are more on display in the *Andante*, which is permeated by a phrase from a Welsh hymn, but the mood remains elegiac, and Lewis spins the long line with a beautiful legato, over the slowly evolving harmonies in the orchestra. Even in the vigorous final *Allegro*, there's time for tender melodic moments, and a reflective cadenza, although the ending does come rather abruptly.

The *Elegy* treads some of the same ground, but its sustained mood, underlined by its major/ minor ambiguity, is deeply felt. It's the sort of piece that needs a subtle and sensitive approach to rubato and phrasing, which Bancroft draws from the orchestra, with a melting violin solo just before the end.

After the stormy opening, the Sinfonia Concertante tends to sit down too much: this is the least successful of the works, never maintaining impetus in the outer movements, nor in the central *Poco lento* which meanders aimlessly, despite some beautiful moments. But again, the performance is exemplary, with Hammond alert and sonorous, and the orchestra, if a little distant in the balance, with her all the way. *Martin Cotton* ★★★★

BRIEF NOTES

Mendelssohn; Bruch* Vaughan Williams**

Violin Concertos*; Lark Ascending** Johan Dalene (violin); Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra/Malin Broman; Gemma New; Swedish Radio Choir/Kaspars Putniņš *BIS BIS-2610 70:06 mins*

Johan Dalene has emerged as one of the most exciting young violinists of recent years, and this album of concerto standards is anything but ordinary. His Mendelssohn may be lightning-quick, but has exceptional range. The Bruch, too, benefits from his idiosyncratic approach to phrasing and pacing. And in the *Lark Ascending* – accompanied by chorus – his unfettered tone is beautifully fluid. *Charlotte Smith* ★★★★★

Mozart **Piano Concertos Nos 18 & 22 (Arr. for Piano, String Quartet & Double Bass by Ignaz Lachner)**

Alon Goldstein, Avery Cardoza; Fine Arts Quartet *Naxos 8574693 63 mins*

Alon Goldstein joins the Fine Arts Quartet and Avery Cardoza for this beautifully fresh chamber take on two of Mozart's Piano Concertos, arranged by Lachner for piano, string quartet and double bass. From the outset, the intimacy of the ensemble and interplay between piano and strings allows the intricate textures to truly shine. Goldstein's piano playing is expressive and full of life, while the quartet bring both warmth and agility throughout. *Miranda Bardsley* ★★★★

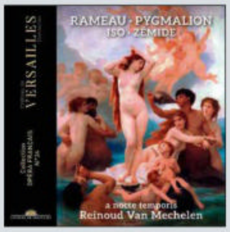
American Dream **Works by Suesse, Beach and Babin**

Ludmila Berlinskaya, Arthur Ancelle (piano); Orchestre Victor Hugo/ Jean-François Verdier, Laurent Comte *Alpha ALPHA1171 64:00 mins*

Concertos for two pianos – by Nadine Dana Suesse and Victor Babin – frame a characterful two-piano suite by Amy Beach in this enjoyable trio of mid-20th century works. From her lively, accessible style, it's not hard to see why Suesse was nicknamed 'Gershwin Girl', while the Moscow-born Babin's concerto reminds one instantly of Prokofiev. *Jeremy Pound* ★★★★

Opera & Stage

OPERA CHOICE



Music to glorify the power of love

Nicholas Anderson finds an attractive 18th-century coupling in fine voice

Iso*; Rameau**

Zémide*; Pygmalion**
Ema Nikolovska, Virginie Thomas et al; A Nocte Temporis, Chœur de Chambre de Namur/ Reinoud Van Mechelen
Château de Versailles Spectacles CVS174 80:10 mins

Readers may be grateful for a heads-up, for this is the second recording of Rameau's *acte de ballet*, *Pygmalion*, to have appeared on the same label, in the same year and in a startlingly similar visual format. What is different, though, in each case, is the work with which it is coupled. In the present instance, the piece is an *acte de ballet*, *Zémide*, by Pierre Iso, which was premiered in Paris in 1759, 11 years after *Pygmalion* and here receiving its world premiere recording. Both versions reflect a practice of the time, termed fragments, by which *pièces choisies* from *opéras-ballets*, by one composer or by more than one, were assembled to form a composite entertainment. The two works in this release, however, are independent *actes de ballet*. Which, like the composite pieces were often called for by the Académie Royale de Musique.

Pygmalion is based on the well-known story by Ovid of the sculptor who falls in love with his own creation. Rameau's music is enchanting throughout, and the piece enjoyed success during the composer's lifetime. Tenor Reinoud Van Mechelen, who also directs the performances, is on characteristically athletic form, delivering all, and especially Pygmalion's ariette 'Règne, amour' with fluency and grace. Iso's *Zémide* celebrates the power of love and, if its music never reaches the Parnassian heights of Rameau's masterpiece, nevertheless it is readily endowed with sensuous allure. There are several effective choruses, notably 'Chantez les charmes' and 'Approchons, enlevons ses armes'. In both works soprano Gwendoline Blondeel is warmly expressive. ★★★★

> Iso's *Zémide* is readily endowed with sensuous allure

Fluency and grace: tenor Reinoud Van Mechelen both sings and directs

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Joe Cutler

Sonata for Broken Fingers
Claire Booth, James Cleverton, Stephen Richardson, Lucy Schaufer et al; Birmingham Contemporary Music Group
BRC BRC029 68 mins

SONATA
BROKEN
FINGERS

The sonata featured in this chamber opera is Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 33, which doesn't exist. The fingers belong to Maria Maximova, a fictional version of Maria Yudina, the Soviet pianist whose playing was supposedly greatly admired by Stalin, despite her support for advanced contemporary music and her intense Christian faith. In this fanciful concoction by lively composer Joe Cutler and librettist Max Hoehn, Yudina's surrogate not only has to record the Beethoven purely for the dictator's ears, the recording is the music he listens to as he breathes his last in the Kremlin in 1953.

Pitched as a grotesque, absurdist thriller, the material allows Cutler to use his gift for parody and create a striking audio drama, scattered with sneezes, vomiting sounds and Stalin's death croaks (chillingly conveyed by Stephen Richardson). But the overall power of this grim cavalcade is limited. Too much time is spent on constantly angular vocal declamations, while Claire Booth's confident virtuosity navigating Maria's vocal extremes is regularly sabotaged by her polite English enunciation whenever her lines are spoken – not a handicap ever felt with the frantic Soviet bureaucrats so vividly portrayed by James Cleverton and Christopher Lemmings.

Instrumentally, Cutler rests on firmer ground, whether in fragments of mock Beethoven or atmospheric growlings from the BCMG's bass clarinet; and Sian Edwards' conducting is commendably sharp. The recording, too, made just before the work's concert premiere last year, is extremely skilful. Even so, for a short opera, *Sonata for Broken Fingers* still proves cumulatively tiresome and fatiguing. *Geoff Brown* ★★★

Donizetti

Lucia di Lammermoor
Lisette Oropesa et al; Orchestra e Coro del Teatro Massimo Bellini di Catania/Fabrizio Maria Carminati
EuroArts 8024211175 141:03 mins (2CD)

LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR

Written in just six weeks in 1835, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* is for many a *bel canto* paradigm. Salvatore Cammarano's taut libretto, borrowed from Walter Scott's blood feud between the Ashtons and the Ravenswoods, a constantly inventive score, hefty roles for four soloists, and a descent into madness make much anticipated demands both on stage and in the studio. Yet at the start of this recording anxious timps and stretched tempi seem lugubrious rather than tragic. By the second scene conductor Carminati seems to have taken the Teatro Massimo di Catania orchestra in hand, though the harp solo that introduces 'Regnava nel silenzio' is over-ripe and Lisette Oropesa's Lucia slightly green. Is that persistent flutter in the voice wavering on the edge of vibrato simply nerves?

Assurance returns when her lover Edgardo, Ştefan Pop, appears. A confident Italianate tenor who sounds as if he's just left a mid-period Verdi work, he sings well and will die handsomely. As for Lucia's mad scene, it's oddly detached – clinical you could say – even when Oropesa displays gravity defying coloratura as she spirals into insanity. And her own cadenza fails to move.

The villain, Mattia Olivieri's Enrico, lacks the darker vocal timbres which should colour his brutality towards a sister he forces into a political marriage to rescue his own fortunes. And Riccardo Zanellato is equally matter of fact as Raimondo, the Ashton family chaplain who, as such, ought to have been more than another abusive man driving a fragile woman to madness and death. *Christopher Cook* ★★★

Journey through time: Stephanie Corley as Susan Cooper in Weill's *Love Life*

SENNE VANDER VEN, JAMES GLOSSOP

Frano Parać

Judita

Croatian Radio Choir (HRT Choir); Münchner Rundfunkorchester/Ivan Repušić et al

BR Klassik 900357 69:57 mins

Over the years, the biblical story of Judith, who seduces Holofernes and then beheads him in order to liberate the people of Bethulia from marauding Assyrian forces, has inspired a number of extended musical works, including the oratorios *Juditha triumphans* by Vivaldi and *La betulia liberata* by Mozart, as well as some more obscure operas such as Honegger's *Judith* and Reznicek's *Holofernes*. This recent incarnation of the story by Frano Parać, which was premiered with some success in 2000, has a strong historical context. Its libretto, based on an epic 15th-century poem, alludes to the Croatian nation's attempts during the middle of the 15th century to defend the city of Split from constant attacks by Turkish armies.

There is certainly a strong sense of theatre in Parać's opera which utilises the time-honoured structures of lamenting choruses, dramatic recitatives and impassioned arias to considerable effect, and adopts an unashamedly traditional and direct musical language, following in the footsteps of Verdi and Puccini, with occasional leanings towards Orff or even Khachaturian. The one big let-down is the scene in which Judith seduces and subsequently beheads Holofernes, which requires a more hard-hitting expressionist treatment à la Richard Strauss.

Yet despite my caveats about this particular episode in the opera, there is little doubt that the soloists, Croatian Radio Choir and the Munich Radio Orchestra under Ivan Repušić deliver a full-blooded and totally committed performance. It's a pity, however, that BR Klassik only provides a summary of the plot, rather than a complete text with English translations. *Erik Levi* ★★★

Piazzolla

María de Buenos Aires

Orchestra Filarmonica della Calabria/Filippo Arlia et al

Brilliant Classics BRI96762 88:96 mins

Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla produced his 'operita' *María de Buenos Aires* in 1968, the unusual designation suggesting something close to operetta and perhaps pointing to the relatively small forces it employs: just three principal performers, a chorus (here eight singers) and a small instrumental ensemble with a notable role for the bandoneon, which becomes a character itself.

Setting a text by the poet Horacio Ferrer, the result blends different genres, from opera to cabaret and other popular national idioms in a unique mix that incorporates spoken text (notably in the role of the Duende, a kind of spirit who narrates the surrealistic story) plus a good deal of purely instrumental numbers to provide opportunities for dance.

The piece has garnered quite a lot of stagings and recordings, with this new one certainly benefiting from the vast experience of Ce Suarez Paz as María, and also as María's ghost. (The sex-worker dies at the end of Part 1 but is resurrected and eventually has a daughter in Part 2).

In terms of idiomatic authority, she is well partnered by the Italian actor Gualtiero Scola (Duende) and the versatile Italian opera singer Alberto Maria Munafò, who takes on half a dozen small roles. The Italian chorus and orchestra under Filippo Arlia flesh out the distinctive sound world of a piece that combines melancholy with vitality. *George Hall* ★★★★

Weill

Love Life: A Vaudeville in Two Parts

Quirijn de Lang, Stephanie Corley, Themba Mvula, Justin Hopkins; Orchestra and Chorus of Opera North/James Holmes

Capriccio C5550 135:79 mins

Despite running for a seemingly respectable 252 performances in 1948-9, this Alan Jay Lerner/Kurt Weill musical lost money and largely disappeared: no cast album was made and a mere handful of songs published.

This is the first complete recording, even taking in a few numbers dropped before opening night: Weill's original orchestration is used for the live performances (Leeds, January 2025) that provided the source.

Leading the show is Weill specialist conductor James Holmes, former music director of Opera North – a company that has helped put Weill back on the map, including with the European premiere of *Love Life* back in 1996.

Basking in the success of *Brigadoon* (1947), Lerner arguably aimed a bit too high in this strange concept piece in which central characters Sam and Susan Cooper (excellently played by Quirijn de Lang and Stephanie Corley) live through several periods of US history from 1791 to 1948 without somehow getting any older.

Linking the time-travelling plot are vaudeville numbers composed in various period styles, beginning with a magician (Themba Mvula) who saws Susan in half in the first scene; Justin Hopkins is memorable in the finest single number, 'Love Song'.

Increasingly unhappy with their marriage, the Coopers get divorced – there's even a 'Divorce Ballet' – though by the end there seems to be a possibility of reconciliation.

The highfalutin result is not that easy to follow and even Weill is not always on top form: but it's an interesting piece, here given a second chance to succeed, and expertly done. *George Hall* ★★★★

Choral

CHORAL CHOICE

rinaldo
alessandrini
concerto italiano
STRAVAGANTE PENSIERO
GESUALDO & NAPOLI

The pain of unrequited love, vividly depicted

Michael Church is entranced by a collection of ardent madrigals by largely unknown Neapolitan composers

Burning passions: Alessandrini and his Concerto Italiano mine love's depths

Stravagante pensiero

Works by Gesualdo & composers of Naples

Concerto Italiano/Rinaldo Alessandrini; Monica Piccinini (soprano); Maria Chiara Gallo (mezzo) et al

Naïve OP8677 62:13 mins

Don't be deceived – Carlo Gesualdo is represented by only one of the 22 madrigals on this CD, and it stands out from the others by its serene grace, rather than by the Houdini-esque harmonic contortions we normally expect from him. For what Rinaldo Alessandrini has done is mine the works by largely unknown Neapolitan composers, to show what extraordinary music was being produced in that city in the early 17th century, with active encouragement by Monteverdi and Gesualdo himself.

> The delight of these songs lies in the perfection of their execution

I had never heard of Scipione Lacorcia (1590-1620) but his five-voice madrigal 'Stravagante pensiero' ('extravagant ideas') blew me away. Monteverdi's *seconda pratica* was based on the glorification of dissonances, rather than on resolving them in *stile antico*. And Lacorcia takes Monteverdi's ball and runs with it flamboyantly until the listener's head swims with wild harmonic confusion.

Almost all these madrigals reflect the pain of unrequited love, and there's a perfect congruence between tortured words and music: 'Alas, my heart flees from me, leaving my bloodless body behind.'

These librettists love paradox, and every kind of metaphorical extremity: 'Your kiss is poison, cruel Phyllis,' sings one. 'Your honeyed mouth is a venomous pit'. Another looks into a faded rose and sees his living death reflected in it.

The delight of these songs lies in the perfection of their execution. Alessandrini and his singers began their career with Monteverdi, learning how to burn with musical passion, and this CD breaks exciting new ground. For small vocal ensembles looking for thrilling new material, this music is a gift. ★★★★★

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Gál

Music for Voices, Volume Three

Carolyn Sampson (soprano) et al; Pixels Ensemble, Borealis Choir/ Bridget Budge, Stephen Muir

Toccata Classics TOCC 0751 62:47 mins

Viennese by birth and Jewish by descent, Hans Gál remains one of those composers whose reputation has been obscured by the vicissitude of 20th-century history. Toccata Classics' ongoing *Music for Voices* series continues its quiet, persuasive advocacy on his behalf. This third instalment, spanning some 40 years, from 1914 to 1954, offers a satisfying portrait of Gál's refinement and lyrical imagination.

From the first bars of *Nachtmusik*, one is reminded of Gál's innate gift for atmosphere and line. The Borealis Choir sing with warmth and sensitivity, their phrasing fluid and conversational. Carolyn Sampson, radiant as ever, weaves her gorgeous soprano through the male chorus with tender, luminous grace. She proves an ideal interpreter of Gál's Brahmsian lyricism – Romantic in impulse yet never overindulgent.

The *Four Part-Songs* on English texts reveal the composer's gift for contour and colour: pastoral ease gives way to quiet elegy, the harmonic writing shaded with subtle, wistful inflections.

At the heart of the programme lies *Of a Summer Day*, a colourful suite for women's choir and soprano solo, framed by instrumental preludes. Its craftsmanship is both descriptive and dramatic, with Mendelssohn clearly a guiding spirit. The airy *Scherzo* sparkles with nimble energy; 'Elegy' withdraws into introspection; and 'Hurricane' conjures a dramatic turbulence. Throughout, conductors Bridget Budge and Stephen Muir allow a quiet eloquence to emerge naturally.

Gál's profound humanism shines through in music that is expressive yet restrained. Toccata's sound engineering captures the clarity and balance of the forces beautifully, giving the listener a sense of intimate communion. For those attuned to the understated appeal of early- to mid-20th-century choral music, this disc is a revelation, confirming the not inconsiderable

significance of Gál's contribution to Europe's choral traditions.
Ashutosh Khandekar ★★★★

Lawes

Lighten mine eies

Ensemble Près de Votre Oreille/
Robin Pharo
Harmonia Mundi HMM905391 62:19 mins

This thoughtful selection of vocal and instrumental music by William Lawes demonstrates some of his fluent, stylistic variety. Though better known for his instrumental music, Lawes' less frequently encountered vocal items, both secular and sacred, are here also given the chance to shine.

The instrumental strand of the disc features movements from the composer's Harp Consorts. Ensemble Près de Votre Oreille draws upon six of the eleven Consorts which are scored for harp, bass viol, violin and theorbo, and which presumably were intended for the talented musicians active at the court of Charles I. From a wealth of pieces of a disparate character the players have chosen the three Pavanes or Pavens, the single 'Fantazy' of the Consorts and three dances. In the Pavanes especially, but also in the 'Fantazy', the harp assumes an important role.

The singing of the vocal compositions is characterised by luminous textures and a sound of commendable purity. These virtues are present above all in the achingly heartfelt *Music, the Master of thy Art is Dead* and the psalm 'Ne irascaris, Domine'. What an enchanting release, and what more might we have expected from this outstandingly gifted composer had he not been killed fighting for the royalist cause at the Siege of Chester.
Nicholas Anderson ★★★★★

Stylistic variety: Ensemble Près de Votre Oreille convince in music by William Lawes

Oliver Tarney

Lux Stellarum

Andrew Dewar (organ); The Choir of Royal Holloway/Rupert Gough
Convivium CR111 28:35 mins

Oliver Tarney's *Lux Stellarum*, a meditation on the wonders of the cosmos, is a brief shimmer of a requiem, coming in at just under half an hour. Written for the choir of the American Cathedral in Paris and their organist Andrew Dewar, it is recorded here – with Dewar – by The Choir of Royal Holloway under Rupert Gough in the fine acoustic of Keble College Chapel, Oxford.

It's an ethereal juxtaposition of choir and organ, plainsong and contemporary. Tarney's light requiem takes elements of the mass and intersperses them with star-filled Bible passages, alongside John Donne and Marjorie Pickthall, in a calling of souls to heaven

The opening Requiem æternam sets the tone – Holloway in angelic voice, the organ, jarring; a plainsong, a building of choral layers, a pulsing setting of scripture: 'Seek him that maketh the seven stars'.

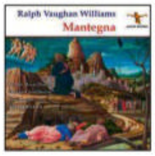
The unpredictable organ, with its occasional deliberate clashes of harmony, is silent for the third section, 'Stars', a meditative vocal setting of Pickthall's eponymous poem. Tarney's music is quietly evocative of her protagonist, staring up at the vastness of the night sky.

The organ opens the Sanctus in thunderous praise before nimbly flitting through the 'Pleni sunt caeli'. Tarney interjects two psalms, as God counts the stars and calls them by their names: a sombre Agnus Dei then a contemplative In paradisum, with fine vocal solos and a stops-out organ baldly finishing the charge that Donne's sermon began.
Sarah Urwin Jones ★★★★

Vaughan Williams

Mantegna

Dulwich Choral Society, London
Mozart Players/William Vann et al
Albion ALBCD067 74:43 mins



Church music was a constant presence in the life of the young Vaughan Williams, even though he was a non-believer. Experience as a church organist secured him the gig of editing *The English Hymnal*, and for over four decades he composed numerous hymn tunes. Some were original melodies, but a substantial number were adaptations of others' music, typically folk tunes or themes by British composers such as Gibbons.

Given Vaughan Williams' own magpie-like tendencies, it seems fitting that most of the numbers on this extremely varied album should be adaptations and orchestrations of his hymn tunes by former students or more recent composers. It's an imaginative conceit: we are given hymns with sumptuous orchestral accompaniment, virtuosic organ works that take a hymn theme as a starting point, orchestral variations on his hymn tunes, and so on. Almost everything we hear is filtered through another composer or arranger's hands – and some are new commissions – yet Vaughan Williams's distinctive musical voice invariably shines through.

In those numbers that remain as hymns, the Dulwich Choral Society is impressively disciplined in ensemble and intonation. (A minor balance issue presumably accounts for the fact that some of the texts – perfectly crisp in the hymns with organ – are a little hard to grasp in those with orchestra.) James Orford gives a bravura performance in the solo organ numbers, and the London Mozart Players steal the show, with passionate playing, conducted with panache by William Vann.
Alexandra Wilson ★★★★

Revolutions

Choral works by Paul Smith

Voces8; Paul Smith (piano), Christophe Duquesne (haken continuum and onde), Teena Lyle (percussion) et al
Voces8 Records 4871593 46:37 mins

With *Revolutions*, Paul Smith brings to a close the trilogy written for Voces8, that began with *Reflections* and *Renewal*. The album continues his search for calm within the noise – music with an inner stillness that comes as an antidote to the hecticness of Christmas cheer.

These six short new choral works, interspersed with electronic improvisations, reveal Smith's familial tenderness towards his ensemble. Smith's fiancée, Daniela Mars, sets the tone in the *Kyrie*, playing a haunting introduction on contrabass flute. As the voices enter, they expand and contract like breathing, sustained by harmonies that glow. 'Love Always Within' captures the emotional heart of the album, culminating in a poignant incantation by Smith's countertenor brother (and Voces8 co-founder) Barney Smith. The closing *Magnificat* draws on traditional idioms – a vibrant celebration of choral music through the ages.

What marks *Revolutions* apart from Smith's earlier albums is the subtle fusion of acoustic and electronic elements. Christophe Duquesne's self-powered wave-form synthesisers hover within the sound rather than around it, extending the resonance of the voices rather than merely accompanying them. Similarly, the flute, electric viola and delicate percussion lines form part of a single, organic fabric that feels at once ancient and modern.

The prevailing mood is trance-like, full of clarity and inner balance, the singing characterised by a purity of tone, control of blend and an instinct for shaping long lines with emotional precision

Beautifully recorded and thoughtfully sequenced, *Revolutions* confirms Paul Smith as a composer of sincerity and purpose, while Voces8 emerges, as ever, as an ensemble whose spellbinding sound communicates warmth and depth.
Ashutosh Khandekar ★★★★

EMILIE MOYSSON, JEAN-BAPTISTE MILLOT

VOCAL CHOICE

LES DIVAS
D'OFFENBACH
VÉRONIQUE GENS
HERVÉ NIQUET

A masterpiece of comic flair from Véronique Gens

Amusing songs by Offenbach sparkle in these irresistible performances, writes *Christopher Dingle*

Linguistic nuance: Véronique Gens shines in works by Offenbach

MARC RIBES/WARNER CLASSICS

Les Divas d'Offenbach

Works by Offenbach
Véronique Gens (soprano); Chœur et Orchestre National des Pays de La Loire/Hervé Niquet
Alpha Classics ALPHA1168 55:49 mins

This is not for the po-faced. If you enjoy charming and inventive music, much of it unfamiliar, allied to witty texts and sung magnificently, then *Les Divas d'Offenbach* will not disappoint. An outstanding earlier Alpha release of rarities, *Offenbach Colorature*, explored the composer's love of stratospheric vocal pyrotechnics, delivered with champagne sparkle by the much-missed Jodie Devos. While that repertoire dazzles, the fine wine of this new disc features music written for the sopranos who tended to carry the drama, singers who possessed the linguistic dexterity and dramatic flair to develop the plot and deliver the often risque jokes.

It is music ideally suited to Véronique Gens with her sumptuous voice and relishing of linguistic nuance. From the enthusiastically lovestruck Hélène, in the previously unpublished 'Un rêve, mon dieu, c'est un rêve' via the tenderly intimate in 'Beauté qui viens des cieux' from *Robinson Crusoé* to the defiantly coquettish Madame Favart in the original, uncut 'Je passe sur mon enface', Gens is irresistible. She inhabits each of the diverse characters here. Cunégonde's tale from *Le Roi Carotte,* of Parisian society providing the 'finishing school' her convent upbringing lacked, is a masterpiece of comic flair; 'Je crois bien et je le promets' from *La Diva* is a riot; while the better-known 'Vous aimez le danger' is a peerless portrayal of the Grand Duchesse's barely controlled desire for military men. Captured in warm, glowing sound, with the superb Choeur et Orchestre des Pays de la Loire matching the music's joie de vivre under Hervé Niquet, this is simply a delight. ★★★★★

> The music is ideally suited to Véronique Gens's sumptuous voice

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Antheil

Songs
Alice Lackner (mezzo-soprano); Philip Mayers (piano)
Brilliant Classics 97689 95:54 mins

The once celebrated *Bad Boy of Music* – the title of his autobiography (1945) – the American of German extraction George Antheil (1900-59) enjoyed a varied and highly visible career in the 1920s and 1930s, much of it in Paris (where he knew just about everyone in the artistic world) and Berlin, until the arrival of the Nazis in 1933 sent him back to the US; there film scores largely occupied him until the end of his life.

Once both famous and infamous, these days Antheil is remembered for his provocative *Ballet mécanique* (1925), but he was prolific in many genres and this wide-ranging disc of his songs proves fascinating.

In date they range from 1914 – Brahmsian settings of German texts – through to 1956-7 songs of the screenwriter Michael Dyne in American popular or cabaret style.

On the way we get impressive settings of Blake, a couple of entertaining Lewis Carroll songs and others by Yeats, Lawrence, Joyce, such Americana as *Frankie and Johnny*, plus two (disappointing) odes by Keats spoken over music, conceived in a wide variety of styles but almost invariably with skill and wit.

The performances are good, though the sound quality is limited and the sung texts are not included in the booklet; yet mezzo Alice Lackner has a good feel for the music and her pianist Philip Mayers matches her perfectly.
George Hall ★★★★

Astrophil & Stella

Works by Patrick Ayrton
Lauren Lodge-Campbell (soprano), Louise Ayrton (violin), Salomé Gasselin (viola da gamba), Patrick Ayrton (harpsichord) et al
Voces8 Records VCM171D 64:48 mins

The works here may sound as if they were written in the distant past, but if you go looking for the name Patrick Ayrton in the

Songs for a father: Mary Bevan and Joseph Middleton work on *Elegy*

Cambridge dictionaries of 16th- or 17th-century music, you'll be disappointed. Ayrton is, in fact, still alive and well today, plying his trade as a performer, composer and university teacher. It is, though, through improvising regularly as a Baroque keyboard player that he has been inspired to take things to the next step by composing his own songs and instrumental ensemble pieces in an Elizabethan and Jacobean style.

For the songs, Ayrton has taken texts by 16th-century poets such as Shakespeare, Donne and John Lyly and set them with no little craft and wit – though lines such as Lyly's 'Oh, for a bowl of fat Canary, Rich Palermo, sparkling Sherry' do a lot of the heavy lifting for him. And from even the briefest listen, it's no surprise to learn that the composer himself cites Purcell as a key influence, but you'd have to be pretty sharp-eared to spot the 'twists' of jazz and prog rock that he says are also in there.

What he does have on his side are sparkling performances. Soprano Lauren Lodge-Campbell's crisp, clean delivery ensures that not a syllable of Ayrton's skilful word-setting is wasted, and she is ably supported by similarly polished playing by an ensemble led by violinist Louise Ayrton, daughter of the composer, who himself is to be heard on the harpsichord and organ. An unlikely, but ultimately enjoyable, project.
Jeremy Pound ★★★★

Chansons & Frottole

Works by Sermisy, Moulu, Dalza, Cara et al
Sophie Klussmann (soprano), Hopkinson Smith (lute)
Naïve E8673 56:47 mins

chansons & frottole
SOPHIE KLUSSMANN
HOPKINSON SMITH

Around 1500, music printing began to replace the old traditions of handwritten scores. Ottaviano Petrucci in Italy and Pierre Attaingnant in France were the pioneers, and these miniature secular songs selected from their collections emerge like bright fireflies out of the dusts of history. Sophie Klussmann (voice) and Hopkinson Smith (lute) bring their widely acknowledged skills to bear on this music that could only have flourished in the wake of the access afforded by the new print culture.

The recording opens with five elegant and refined skirmishes with the travails of love, in which the resulting pains are never overindulged. There is not a lot to work with here in terms of text expression and harmony, but they suit the cool, poised voice of Sophie Klussmann, especially in Sermisy's 'Tant que vivrai' which is strophic, chordal and in the major key. His 'Jouissance vous donneray' gives Hopkinson Smith a chance to put his lute through its paces in the quiet, intricate tracery of counterpoint in the accompaniment, and he also negotiates some tricky lute solos by Capirola and Dalza. The Italian vocal pieces are more varied. The mood of determined cheerfulness in Cara's 'Io non compro' is captured perfectly (aided by the upward transposition of pitch), and the anonymous 'Se mai per maraveglia', which meditates on the death of Christ, evokes a beautifully controlled chant-like recitation from the singer. Tromboncino's 'Ala guerra' is the longest piece here and provides ample proof that the performers are as one stylistically and musically.
Anthony Pryer ★★★★

Elegy

Works by Ravel, Chausson, Schubert, Fauré et al
Mary Bevan (soprano), Joseph Middleton (piano)
Signum Classics SIGCD939 68:01 mins

The elegy here is for the soprano Mary Bevan's father David who led his gifted family on many musical journeys before his death in 2021. Grief, loss and consolation consort with thoughts of death in a wide-ranging programme that stretches from Britten's arrangement of Purcell's *Evening Hymn* to the newly appointed Master of the King's Music, Errollyn Wallen's deceptively simple *Peace on Earth*.

It seems fitting that the programme should begin with Ravel's setting of *Kaddisch*, recited at Jewish funerals and sung by Bevan with a commanding lyrical directness as Joseph Middleton embraces the composer's rolling arpeggios and accents.

Later, Schubert rubs shoulders with Brahms, Schumann and Mahler while Chausson and Fauré add Gallic thoughts about regret and absence. In the German repertoire – Mahler's 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen', for example – Bevan slightly struggles with her German diction while pushing her tone in an uncomfortable manner in Fauré's 'Après un rêve'. Yet there's a charm to Canadian composer Jeanne Landry's little-known 'Mort quand tu me viendras prendre', written at the turn of the 20th century after she studied with Nadia Boulanger.

Indeed, Bevan is at her most persuasive in the lesser-known songs she chooses. She and Middleton excel in Ralph Vaughan Williams' late song 'Tired' and it would be impossible to imagine a more satisfying version of Frank Bridge's almost bluesy 'Come to me in my dreams'. Those who have passed and the past itself are well remembered in such a song.
Christopher Cook ★★★★

The Garland

Art Song by Elizabeth Maconchy
Joanna Songi (soprano), Matthew Fletcher (piano)
CRD CRD3562 22:85 mins

This recording contributes to the overdue recognition of Elizabeth Maconchy's contribution to vocal music, complementing the increasing acknowledgment of her superb string quartets. The scores (held at St Hilda's College, Oxford) span the 1920s to 1950s, years of transformation in British music. Yet Maconchy was no provincial, sharing greater affinity with figures like Bartók, or the music of her native Ireland.

The songs offer wit, charm, pastoralism, sophistication and an edge of darkness. Tenderly archaic settings like 'Have You Seen but a Bright Lily Grow' and the otherworldly 'Had I the Heavens' Embroidered Cloths' sit alongside 'In Fountain Court', which evokes summerlike perfection. The closing 'Harp Song of the Dane Women' reveals a bleak Nordic dimension in women's lives that Maconchy certainly wrestled with personally. This brief disc leaves listeners wishing that Maconchy's compositional life had afforded her greater opportunities to explore her profound lyric responses to text.

Joanna Songi brings a finely coloured voice and lively textual engagement to this music, allied with flawless intonation. On occasion, a broader colouristic palette, and a fuller sustained and vibrated sound, would strengthen the interpretations. Yet her profound empathy and passion for this music shines throughout. Though moments of greater presence or textural bite might strengthen certain passages, pianist Matthew Fletcher also provides beautifully traced accompaniment, wonderfully delicate in 'There is a Lady Sweet and Kind'.
Natasha Loges ★★★

Instrumental

INSTRUMENTAL CHOICE

Baroque masterpieces rearranged

Martin Fröst reimagines Bach through the single reed, writes *Ingrid Pearson*

B.A.C.H.

Works by Bach arr. for clarinet

Martin Fröst (clarinet); Jonas Nordberg (lute) et al

Sony Classical 19802814742 41:45 mins

The album *B.A.C.H.* from Swedish clarinettist and conductor Martin Fröst continues his fruitful association with Sony Classical. Fröst's collaborative homage to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach includes his violist brother Göran and pianist Benny Andersson, known as a member of one of Sweden's most celebrated ensembles. Of the album's 17 tracks, 14 pair the clarinet with either double bass, cello, theorbo or viola. The remaining three are trios.

Fröst's album testifies to the versatility of the clarinet

Whilst his cousin Johann Ludwig (1677-1731) included a chalumeau in a secular cantata from 1728, JS Bach appears not to have composed for any single-reed instruments. In addressing that lacuna, Fröst's album testifies to the versatility of the clarinet, reminding us of the appeal of a single-reed timbre. The arrangements often showcase the clarinet's bright middle-register, facilitating Fröst's versatility, despite a relatively small palette of colours. The album opens with the familiar *Goldberg Variations* Aria with a clarinet soprano tessitura and pizzicato double bass invoking an intimate listening experience. Fröst's own arrangement of the chorale 'Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden', from the *St Matthew Passion*, cleverly blends multi-tracked clarinets and cello. The resultant rich warmth calls to mind the celebrated chorale in Alban Berg's Violin Concerto.

Tracks with theorbo reveal an affinity between this plucked string sonority and the clarinet. Amongst these, the fifth French Suite *Allemande* presents Fröst with opportunities for some melodic ornamentation. The album's final track evinces a truly 21st-century Bach, combining Andersson's unmistakably individual touch at the piano with Fröst's expressive clarinet roulades. ★★★★★

Reed the rewards: Martin Fröst transforms Bach's works in his latest album

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Beethoven

The Late Piano Sonatas

Paul Wee (piano)

BIS BIS-2765 128:24 mins

Paul Wee is keen to stress that his day job as a successful barrister takes precedence over his passion for playing the piano, and so he counts as an amateur musician. Even so, judging from this new recording of the five last Beethoven sonatas his keyboard technique is dazzling, and the notoriously demanding 'Hammerklavier', Op. 106 holds no terrors for him. This was Beethoven's only sonata for which he supplied metronome markings, and few pianists attempt to match the almost impossibly quick values he indicated for its outer movements. Wee, however, is well up there, though whether his jaw-dropping, dizzying account of the colossal fugal finale accords with Beethoven's additional verbal tempo description of *Allegro risoluto* is open to question.

Unfortunately, Wee's finger dexterity isn't always matched by his footwork. Near the end of the middle movement of the Op. 101 Sonata, for instance, the music's crisp articulation is suddenly countered by a delicate passage which Beethoven wanted pedalled through, to create a blurred sound. The moment is one that affects the character of the entire piece, but Wee bypasses the pedal marking, as he does, even more curiously, at the ending of the second slow section in Op. 110, where a series of increasingly forceful reiterations of the same chord is designed to create an overwhelming resonance, out of which the quiet return of the fugue emerges. Of the many other details of these life-enhancing works that fail to materialise, one of the most regrettably absent is the *ritardando* in the very last bar of the Sonata Op. 109, which casts a valedictory glow over the reprise of the sarabande-like theme on which the finale's variations are based.

Misha Donat ★★★

Michael Finnissy

Organ Works

Forrest Eimold (organ)

Métier Records MEX77208 134:38 mins

Christmas and organ music go together like... well, probably not like Michael Finnissy, one of the leading figures of the New Complexity movement. But as an antidote to musical tinsel, this new double album devoted to a wonderfully uncompromising composer is very welcome. Much of his huge output features titles that themselves can sound complicated, yet the existence of his four baldly titled organ symphonies is a reminder that Finnissy has often written in some sort of response to tradition. There's a neo-classical rigour to the Organ Symphony No. 1, underlined by the registrations Forrest Eimold (himself also a composer) finds on the organ of Blackburn Cathedral (the organs of the Memorial Church of Harvard University feature too). The cataclysmic climax of this work is marked '*fff*!', and one can hear the exclamation mark.

The Organ Symphony No. 2 owes more to the French Romantic tradition (evoked here in colours of thrilling bite) and is one of the highlights of the record, but every time Finnissy appears to be leaning towards tradition, as in his *7 Hymn-Tune Preludes*, he veers off somewhere else rewardingly.

Completed in 2022, these are not chorale preludes in any conventional sense and conjure up only faint allusions to the tunes behind them. Eimold's project gives us the long view of a composer who turns 80 in 2026: *...ere the set of the sun...* is based on music written for a production of *Macbeth* during his schooldays and *Xunthaeresis* employs aleatoric devices that were in fashion when Finnissy was a student. *John Allison* ★★★★

Gaspard Le Roux

Complete Suites

Daniel-Ben Pienaar (piano)

Avie AV 2701 87:57 mins (2CD)

GASPARD
LE ROUX
Complete Suites
DANIEL-BEN
PIENAAR

With this, the first recording of keyboard suites by Gaspard Le Roux to be played on the piano, Daniel-Ben Pienaar poses the question, why does the French Baroque composer continue to be neglected? Part of the answer lies in the enigma of the man himself. Almost nothing is known about Le Roux, except that he published a set of *Pièces de clavessin* in Paris in 1705 and that he may have died two years later.

The pieces (most of which last around two minutes) are grouped into seven suites, each in a different key. They range from the energetic *Courantes* in the First and Third Suites in D minor and A minor to the gentle stateliness of the *Chaconne* in the Fifth Suite in F major. Le Roux allowed for them to played on one or two harpsichords, or else by a trio of instruments, so Pienaar's rendition of them on a modern piano sounds perfectly natural. He also takes advantage of Le Roux's compositional flexibility to make some choice additions, elaborations and amendments. The result is an attractive and distinctive collection of keyboard music that looks back to early masters like Louis Couperin and Jean-Henri d'Anglebert and forward to later innovators such as Jean-Philippe Rameau and François Couperin.

One quibble is that Pienaar might have injected more individuality into his playing of some of the character portraits – pieces named after people, places or manners long since forgotten. The recorded sound from Cardiff's School of Music Concert Hall is appropriately warm and intimate. *John-Pierre Joyce* ★★★

Golden autumn: Hardenberger and Pöntinen record *Autumn Aubade*

Autumn Aubade

Works by Ahbez, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Gruber, Enescu, Chopin, Roland Pöntinen et al

Håkan Hardenberger (trumpet); Roland Pöntinen (piano)

BIS BIS-2723 68:44 mins

AUTUMN AUBADE

'Collaboration' is a word often used in music making, though in reality, this can often mean 'soloist' and 'accompanist.' Trumpeter Håkan Hardenberger and pianist Roland Pöntinen's recent project, *Autumn Aubade*, however exemplifies stunning complementary partnership, with both showing deep musical connection.

Their choices for this album are a portrayal of some of their most fruitful musical relationships, with contemporary composers and repertoire stretching back to the mid 19th century. Their musical flexibility becomes immediately evident in the opening piece *Nature Boy* which is a beautiful realisation, with most of the interest in the piano voicings, and the trumpet unashamedly playing the head with just a hint of vibrato and lovely phrasing. Interest continues with use of the flugal horn in Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Autumn Aubade,* matching late-20th century harmonic language with a flawless tone, minimal embellishments and a powerful, rich sound.

Even on the trumpet, the warmth of the flugal horn is embraced by Hardenberger – mainly because he has such a broad timbre. But this musicality clearly works so effortlessly because of Pöntinen's sensitivity, which surpasses normal expectations. Apart from being a superb pianist, his compositions *Bluebird Dream* and *Prélude d'automne* are uplifting, explorative and resonant. The sonorities of the two musicians seem to melt into each other – and Staffan Storm's *Three Autumns* continues their seamless interchange of ideas and textures.

It is these textures and autumnal colours, combined with virtuosity and intimacy, that reveal one of the best qualities on this album – outstanding programme curation. Listen and be enchanted. *Anne Templer* ★★★★★

In holiday clothing, out of the great darkness

Works for solo cello

Clarice Jensen (cello)

Fatcat Records LP13-63 39:74mins

In this mesmerising new album, cellist and composer Clarice Jensen returns to her roots. While Jensen's last solo release, the acclaimed EP *Esthesis*, was characterised by complex electronic sonorities, *In holiday clothing, out of the great darkness* is all about the cello. Jensen's signature loops and drones remain, but as the composer explains, 'It felt necessary to return to the rich acoustic sound of the cello that I've loved and produced for nearly my entire life.' As such, Jensen limits herself to a handful of sonic effects: octave displacement, delay, tremolo and looping. The result is beautiful, moving and often hypnotic.

The title work, divided into two parts and placed across the album, takes its name from a line in Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*: 'what steps forth, in holiday clothing, out of the great darkness'. For Jensen, this is a metaphor for the creative process itself, and feelings of both tension and joyful release that permeate the work. Structurally, it takes flight from Bach's Cello Suites, borrowing snippets of figuration throughout, most strikingly at the opening where flowing arpeggios reminiscent of the Cello Suite No. 1 swim by, performed with both warmth and poise by Jensen.

Two 'mirror' tracks, *2,1* followed by *1,2,* are also particularly appealing. Both are underpinned by a pulsing drone upon which Jensen's overlaid harmonies amass with satisfying crunch. As with much of the album, there is a feeling here of being invited to slow down

BRIEF NOTES

Journey through time: Tiffany Poon guides the listener through centuries with *Nature*

REMY HOLWICK

Mompou **Piano Music** Paul Crossley (piano) *CRD CRD3553 76 mins*

THE SAD SMILE

In this exquisite record, Paul Crossley brings complete sensitivity to Federico Mompou's deeply introspective piano world. Crossley captures the composer's hushed stillness, leaning into his lush harmonic writing, and from the outset, evoking echoes of Debussy's impressionism and Satie's minimalistic restraint. The accompanying booklet notes that Mompou's work is that of 'adumbration – everything a faint sketch... a glimpse,' and this feels accurate from the opening *Musica Callada,* its poise and sense of suspended atmosphere setting the tone for this intimate collection of pieces. *Miranda Bardsley* ★★★★★

Tiffany Poon **Nature** *Pentatone PTC5187423 65 mins*

Nature
Tiffany Poon

Bringing together movements by French composers from across the centuries, Tiffany Poon's album is inspired by the natural world – but it's also a perfectly paced programme, which takes the listener on a chronological journey from the Baroque to impressionism. The album is closely recorded, showcasing Poon's gorgeously poised and articulated pianism – and it's an enchanting experience. *Charlotte Smith* ★★★★★

Price **Organ Works** Tom Winpenny (organ) *Naxos 8559956 67 mins*

AMERICAN CLASSICS
PRICE
Organ Works
Tom Winpenny, Organ

Florence Price spent many an hour at the organ providing the music for silent film screenings, and here we get a well-rounded overview of her own works for the instrument, from the early First Sonata to the *Variations on a Folksong ('Peter, go ring dem bells').* Though a virtuoso player herself, Price rarely indulges in fireworks, but instead lets her own melodic gift – or, elsewhere, skill at reworking the melodies of others – work the magic. She is done excellent service here by Tom Winpenny on the Skinner Organ of Saalkirche Ingelheim. *Jeremy Pound* ★★★★

and allow the brain to immerse itself in music of power and beauty. Highly recommended.
Kate Wakeling ★★★★

Nánd

Works by Hafliði Hallgrímsson and Hugi Guðmundsson
Sigurgeir Agnarsson (cello)
Crescendo CRESC001 66:37 mins

Icelandic music is generally little-known across the seas, these solo works for cello offering a welcome contribution to the genre. Hugi Guðmundsson's opening set, *Coniunctio*, conceived in five movements, was written for the album, and dedicated to cellist Sigurgeir Agnarsson. Cast in direct tonality, 'Reverie' is an unassuming gentle rocking start. The ensuing 'Psalm' offers some more astringent harmonies, and tremolando fluttering textures, a good contrast to 'Perpetual' which uses cross-accents to effect gentle syncopation.

But 'Veris' from his *Alluvium* (2019) is a more striking composition, using electronics and loops to shroud the cello line in mystery. They 'freeze moments in time' while the lyrical cello line has a beautiful timbre, elegantly performed by Agnarsson.

This is something of a family affair – Hafliði Hallgrímsson is the uncle of Guðmundsson, and Agnarsson has known both since childhood. There is a complete understanding in these performances, which maybe results from these close ties and long-term creative artistic collaborations.

The two sets of *Solitaire* by Halgrímsson are separated by over 50 years. The first set's 'Oration' is cast in edgy tonality with a strong declamatory statement, treated to a highly virtuosic rendition. 'Serenade' focuses on pizzicato invention – akin to the similarly titled 'Serenata' movement in Britten's First Suite, whereas 'Nocturne' is characterised by mesmerising droning double stops.

The second set of *Solitaire* perhaps has more defined material, 'Lamento' bursting onto the scene with strong emotion cast in double stops. 'Circum' is given over to pizzicato motives, the strumming suggesting a Spanish influence. 'Perpetuum Mobile' in contrast offers subtle syncopation in fluctuating metres, energised and edgy in this insightful and refined performance. *Jo Talbot* ★★★★

Sing! Songs Without Words

Works by Schumann, Brahms and Wagner
Raphaël Sévère (clarinet); Adam Laloum (piano)
Harmonia Mundi HMM902746
60:08 mins

Both Brahms and Schumann sanctioned playing some of their chamber works on other instruments, and it was the singing quality of Richard Mühlfeld's playing that charmed Brahms out of retirement and inspired the four great late chamber pieces. So neither composer is likely to have minded anyone arranging their songs for clarinet and piano too much.

Raphaël Sévère plays these songs with restrained, refined elegance and he has a fine feeling for hushed expression, which Adam Laloum balances and reflects very nicely. As salon instrumental pieces, Schumann's 'Widmung' and Brahms' 'Wie Melodien' work really well. It is on the whole a very pleasing disc, and if you didn't know the songs you might ask where the problem is. Well, for all his subtlety, Sévère doesn't really do big, bold and impassioned, and I miss that occasionally in the Brahms and Schumann songs, and more than occasionally in the Wagner.

Even more than that, I missed the words in subtler and more psychologically penetrating songs like Brahms' 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer', or Schumann's 'Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen'. If you think German's an unmusical language, listen to these, and then to a really good recording of the originals – Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau will do nicely. So much is lost without the sound of the words, let alone their power of suggestion.

Recordings are good, though there is what sounds like a tiny mistake in the piano at the quiet heart of 'Mondnacht' – not exactly the ideal place for it. *Stephen Johnson* ★★★

The Well-'Tampered' Clavier

Bach arr. Sam Post
Sam Post and Ralitza Patcheva
Acis APL53516 102:69 mins

The pun in the title is neat and apposite, but the underlying aim is a question mark. Pianists Sam Post and Ralitza Patcheva preface this version of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 1 with parallel spiels which imply that, though Post is the 'arranger', the result of their tampering is a joint attempt to radically recompose the great composer.

Acknowledging Glenn Gould's energetically bouncy articulation as his inspiration, Post hopes his 'rhythmically re-envisioned' *Well-Tempered Clavier* will liberate Bach from the time-honoured constraints of strict rhythmical correctness. And it will incorporate, says Patcheva, all the rhythmic innovations of the 20th century 'including world music, ragtime and jazz'. Post says these arrangements give him 'a feeling of infinite possibility and freedom'.

Such promises don't stand up to scrutiny. Post's principal weapon is a musical version of the missing step on the Elizabethan staircase – it's designed to throw invaders off balance. And when whole pieces are constructed round this device, listeners get itchy, as they do when simple syncopation – another of Post's standbys – is served up as though that's all you need to create jazz. The two pianists share keyboard duties, and although Post is undeniably a clever pianist, I prefer Patcheva as being less tricksy.

So, what is it all for? Many of these pieces can be plain irritating, their original beauty of line wantonly scratched and scrawled over. A few versions are so boldly tampered with that they even emerge as different pieces altogether, which in its own way is fine. And a very few exemplify the pianists' promise to do something original with rhythm, as tempos are slowed down or speeded up. *Michael Church* ★★★

Two for Rachmaninov

Suite Nos 1 & 2 for Two Pianos; Symphonic Dances

Eric Zuber and Boris Slutsky (piano)

Azica Records Azica71384 77 mins

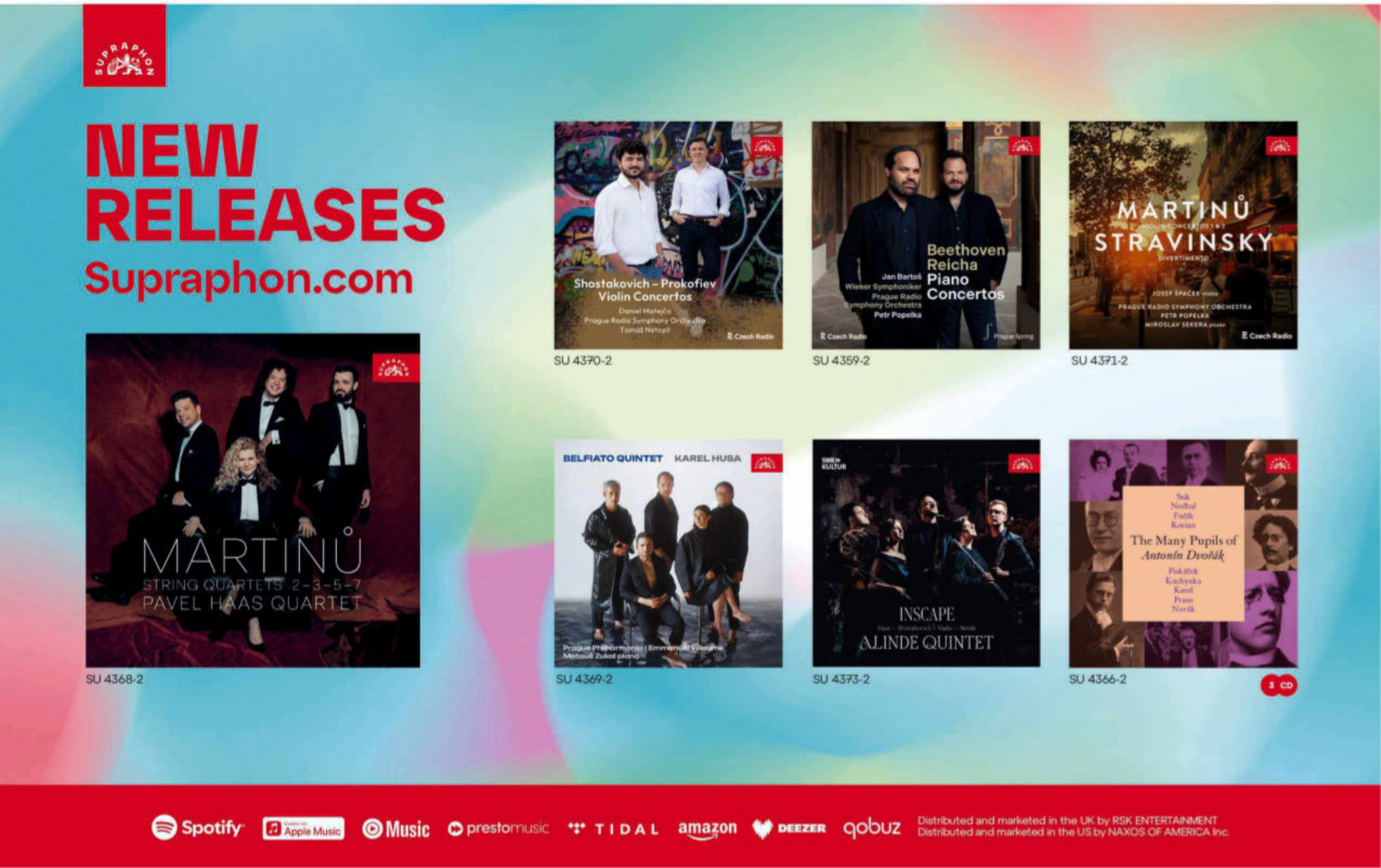
Two for Rachmaninoff

Two for Rachmaninov: the two pianists in question are Eric Zuber and his former mentor of 20 years, now turned recording partner, Boris Slutsky. That close relationship pays dividends here, and their musical bond is seamless, the execution of their musical ideas always in sync.

And any album exploring Rachmaninov's works for two pianos interestingly traces the contours of his career: the First Suite of 1893 was written in imperial Russia, dedicated to Tchaikovsky and premiered with the virtuoso Rachmaninov at the piano; the Second Suite hails from Italy in 1901, as he was recovering from the creative depression that set in after his First Symphony. The *Symphonic Dances* take us to 1940, when he had left his homeland for the United States.

Each of the First Suite's four movements was inspired by poetry, and Zuber and Slutsky convincingly convey the individual poetic ideas, from the languid arpeggios and singing tune of the 'Barcarolle' to the lamenting, falling motifs in 'Les Larmes' ('The Tears'). Yet at times their piano tone is rather forceful and there's room for more nuanced tone. In their recent *Rachmaninov for Two* album, covering the same repertoire, Daniil Trifonov and Sergei Babayan on Deutsche Grammophon find a subtler range of colours and sonorities.

In the Second Suite, Rachmaninov plays with musical rather than poetic ideas, giving us a *March*, *Waltz*, *Romance* and *Tarantella*, and the duo find a natural flexibility, particularly in the fleet-fingered *Presto Waltz*. There's a sense that the pair are relishing this music. In the *Symphonic Dances*, better known in its orchestral version, their steel-edged drive returns, although the melancholic outpouring in the first movement is beautifully handled. Overall, Louis Lortie and Hélène Mercier are crisper and more sensitive in their Chandos recording, but there's plenty of feeling here. *Rebecca Franks* ★★★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Chamber

CHAMBER CHOICE

RUBICON
SAARIAHO & SHOSTAKOVICH
TERRA MEMORIA
DUDOK QUARTET
AMSTERDAM

Insightful performances to honour the departed

Erik Levi is highly impressed by detailed and nuanced interpretations from the Dudok Quartet

Disturbing narrative: Dudok Quartet Amsterdam shines a light in the dark

Terra Memoria

Works by Saariaho and Shostakovich
Dudok Quartet Amsterdam
Rubicon RCD1218 59:41 mins

Carrying a dedication to 'those who have departed', Kaija Saariaho's *Terra Memoria* for string quartet, composed in 2006, is a wonderfully evocative piece which attempts to reflect upon the lives and experiences of people who are no longer with us. Subtle transformations of easily identifiable musical material coalesce with more static ideas to create a fantastical dreamscape world whose range of colours and timbres sustains the listener's attention from first bar to last.

> Inner details in the Shostakovich are projected with powerful intensity

At first glance, Saariaho's intricate post-tonal language seems far removed from the distinctive mixture of neo-classical, ironic and romantic musical allusions that characterise Shostakovich's Third String Quartet. On closer acquaintance, however, there is a tangible connection between the two works, since Shostakovich originally added, and subsequently suppressed, descriptive titles to each of the work's five movements, the fourth of which was called 'In memory of the dead'.

Having much admired the Dudok Quartet's recording of Tchaikovsky's Third Quartet earlier this year, I was fully expecting a similar level of musical accomplishment in this warmly engineered release. Indeed, the performances of both the Saariaho and Shostakovich are extremely insightful. The Shostakovich is outstanding in delineating the quartet's disturbing narrative, from seemingly carefree innocence to a growing sense of anxiety and emotional collapse. Inner details, such as the increasingly sinister fugal entries that appear in the middle of the first movement, or the juxtaposition between non-vibrato unisons and full-blooded violin soliloquies at the opening of the fourth, are projected with powerful intensity, giving this interpretation the edge over many distinguished others. ★★★★★

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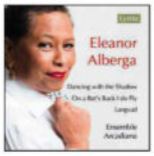
YURI ANDRIES, STUART LOWE

Eleanor Alberga

Works for Chamber Ensemble
Ensemble Arcadiana
Lyrita SRCD446 53:36 mins



Following a handful of releases on the Navona label in 2019 and 2021, Ensemble Arcadiana return to the music of Eleanor Alberga, capturing three works for chamber orchestra, recorded at Wyastone Concert Hall in Monmouthshire. The ensemble includes Alberga's husband, violinist Thomas Bowes, and is associated with the pair's Arcadia Festival, which ran until 2022.

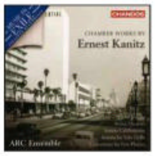
We begin in 1990 with the oldest work, *Dancing with the Shadow*, a playful dialogue between musicians – each movement scored for a different combination of instruments, adding one more player each time. Culminating in a sextet finale, this functions well as an opener, the clarinet exploring a theme and expanding upon it, more elaborately by the minute. Throughout, the instruments dance around one another and land on crashing chords in perfect unison. Tentative and decisive, playful and dark, relentless movement and moments of pause – there are plenty of twists and turns, delivered neatly by the ensemble.

Alberga's colourful textures are brought into sharp focus in this recording, with the edgy, spiky momentum captured with drama by Ensemble Arcadiana. *On a Bat's Back I do Fly* (2000) flutters excitedly, yet like much of Alberga's work, gives you plenty to grab onto, without getting lost in what could otherwise be a dense sound world.

The most recent work, *Langvad* (2006), completes the set and offers a full range of timbres and tones, with each instrument pushed to its limits. The clarinet wails like a saxophone, the flute cascades and the violin explores its quietest possible range. The parts skip over one another, coming together for moments of climax – deftly handled by these musicians. *Freya Parr*
★★★★

Ernest Kanitz

Chamber Works
ARC Ensemble
Chandos CHAN20374 73:52 mins



That there continue to be 20th-century composers hitherto unknown indicates the avoidable artistic loss incurred on top of the more obvious atrocities wreaked by the Second World War. That there is enough music for an entire series of largely premiere recordings is testament to the scale of the disruption. Ernest Kanitz (1894-1978) is the latest focus of Toronto-based ARC Ensemble's excellent *Music in Exile* project, an on-going effort to give persecuted musicians a more deserving legacy. Like his fellow *Music in Exile* colleague Jerzy Fitelberg (Vol 2), Kanitz fled the Nazis and settled in the US, where he went on to teach music at the University of Southern California. His later works – including a Bassoon Concerto (1962) – are tinged with Americana, but the early-period pieces featured here are more closely associated with his career in Vienna. The Violin Sonata (1921) embodies this Romanticism; an impressionistic opening quickly finds a more robust footing. Violinist Anna Štube deals in ravishing melodies and dreamy asides; Kanitz balances the finely carved material with expressive, seemingly off-the-cuff diversions. The same can be said of the 1945 String Quartet, which, with a traditional Viennese tune as a theme for a set of gracefully reflective variations may have been a response to an extended period of loss. Austrian café culture seems a long way away in *Sonata Californiana* (1948), a free flowing, harmonically ambiguous work for alto saxophone and piano. A spirited third movement dedicated to Kanitz's new home in Hollywood is stylishly drawn by saxophonist Wallace Halladay. *Claire Jackson* ★★★★

Harford Lloyd

Chamber Music for Clarinet

Matthew Nelson (clarinet), Alexander Volpov (cello), Chad Sloan (baritone), Anna Petrova (piano)

Toccata Classics TOCC0768 57:18 mins

Charles Harford LLOYD

Amidst the chamber music of Charles Harford Lloyd (1849-1919), works for clarinet are well-represented. This new album features Kentucky-based clarinettist Matthew Nelson, with two of his University of Louisville colleagues, pianist Anna Petrova and baritone Chad Sloan, and cellist Alexander Volpov.

Opening the album is a new version of the B flat major Trio for clarinet, bassoon and piano, with the bassoon part adapted for cello. Nelson, Petrova and Volpov establish this new instrumentation as a worthy companion piece to Brahms' more well-known offering. With Petrova, Nelson gives an assured account of the *Duo concertante*, albeit not as nuanced and dramatic as Colin Lawson's 2003 recording on his Albert-system clarinet for Clarinet Classics. Nelson's tuning in the lower chalumeau register could also be more assiduous. Nelson shines in *Annette* for baritone and piano with clarinet obbligato but Sloan's vibrato hinders and his delivery lacks the polish of Fischer-Dieskau's 1983 interpretation for Orfeo. With the premiere recording of *Suite in the Old Style* (Travaglini and Howell, Sheva Collection, 2009) hard to find the interpretation here is welcome. A clarinet in C assumes the violin's role in Nelson's premiere recordings of the *Three Little Pieces* and *Idyll* largely successfully, despite occasional clarinet register intonation blemishes.

Detailed and well-researched booklet notes by Nelson generously contextualise Lloyd's clarinet music, making this a welcome release for players and listeners alike. *Ingrid Pearson* ★★★★

A legacy preserved: ARC Ensemble give voice to the suppressed

Christopher Stark

Fire Ecologies

Unheard-of Ensemble

New Focus FCR448 52:43 mins

Fire Ecologies

Several notable pieces have enjoyed aquatic premieres – from Handel's Thames-based *Water Music* to Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*, performed on Thorpeness Meare – but Christopher Stark's *Fire Ecologies*, which was first showcased at the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, uses that immersive setting to enhance the music's storytelling in a more meaningful way.

Fire Ecologies samples field recordings Stark – associate professor of composition at Washington University in St Louis – harvested during the 2020 US wildfires; the earth's crackles and sighs are contrasted with impatient electronic glitches. New York's Unheard-of Ensemble – Ford Fourqurean (clarinet), Matheus Souza (violin), Iva Casian-Lakoš (cello) and Daniel Anastasio (piano) – find beauty in this dystopia.

Stark sets six 'scenes' that each refer to an element of the natural world explored in a canonic piece. For example, the second scene 'Jeux d'eau' (Water Games) invokes Ravel; the rhythmic strings and popping candy electronics are all Stark. Stravinsky-ish scene four features a deliciously crunchy bass clarinet beat as a catchy harbinger of catastrophe, while five recalls Grieg's *Peer Gynt* – if the eponymous hero was journeying through burned-out forests.

Stark's compelling work fits a current cultural trend: Ian McEwan's new book *What We Can Know* describes how people in the 22nd century refer to our period as 'the Derangement' because everyone was aware of climate change but failed to act. We need to listen to *Fire Ecologies* in more ways than one. *Claire Jackson* ★★★★

Bruce Wolosoff

Blue Mantra; Matisse Fantasies; Blues for the New Millenium

Bruce Wolosoff (piano); Narek Arutyunian (clarinet); Michelle Ross (violin); Clarice Jensen (cello)

Avie AV2810 47:57 mins

BRUCE WOLOSOFF
BLUE MANTRA

Composer and pianist Bruce Wolosoff's background encompasses both classical music and jazz, but rather than falling back on superficial mashups he knowingly dismantles his chosen elements and reassembles them in (mostly) convincing ways.

That said, such a process brings its own pitfalls. In the three pieces inspired by Matisse, these ingredients cancel each other out, with the resulting quasi-salon music tipping over into what Andy Vores has tellingly dubbed 'the New Niceness'. While there seems to be a place for this at present, more demanding listeners will want to focus on the other two compositions presented here. While *Blues for the New Millennium* was originally a commission marking that occasion and intended to celebrate the attendant process of transition, the piece's capricious nature is prophetic. Full of rapid thematic transitions and false resolutions, its recurring blues motifs and jazz hooks delivering interventions that are funereal and uplifting by turn, it could be described as a depiction of the uncertainties of our age.

Blue Mantra, the title piece that closes this recording, is almost casual in its innovative upending of the ways in which jazz has been combined with the musics of other cultures. Inspired by a painting by Margaret Garrett, it re-imagines the blues riff as a repeated religious utterance. The result is hypnotic and assertive without being strident, which seems true to its inspiration.

The music is well-served by its performers and warm, uncluttered recorded sound. *Roger Thomas* ★★★

ARIRANG

Works by Bloch, Debussy, Caroline Shaw, Iman Habibi et al
Daniel Hamin Go (cello), Benjamin Smith (piano), Jonathan Stuchbery (theorbo); The Gil Ensemble; Yemel Philharmonic Society
Orchid Classics ORC100397 60:05 mins

Daniel Hamin Go's debut features composers who have transformed suffering into works of hope and beauty – a poignant and relevant concept with a convincing programme that spans many cultures and times.

Many of the works echo earlier eras. Caroline Shaw's *In Manus Tuas* pays homage to Tallis in brief luminous fragments, the solo cello line dying away and reappearing to poignant effect. Anna Pidgorna's *Grief Cycles* are variations on Ukrainian folk songs – their shifting moods are well navigated, though at times the balance between cello and piano is slightly uneven in the mix. This new commission continues the melancholic mood of the preceding Bloch's *From Jewish Life*, whose three movements are interspersed across the programme. The performances themselves occasionally feel slightly tentative, and with many forthright recordings of works such as Debussy's Cello Sonata available, this is a little overshadowed.

Taking its name from a famous Korean folk song meaning 'beautiful beloved one', 'Arirang' is heard here in a new arrangement, which incorporates themes from the Korean national anthem and a pop tribute to the original. With overlapping textures and a shimmering opening, the climax teeters into musical theatre territory, which feels out of step with the rest of the programme. The preceding selection, however, presents a thoughtful and considered journey, offering moments of power and optimism among a backdrop of melancholy. *Freya Parr* ★★★

Organisms

Works by Bach, Sweelinck, Bruhns, Brahms, Price et al
Calefax
Pentatone PTC5187488 74:38 mins

Faultless playing: Calefax reimagine organ works for winds

SARAH WIJZENBEEK

Organisms is not only a nice pun, but also a strong concept: reimagining organ music from across the ages for wind quintet. In arrangements by members of Calefax – Raaf Hekkema (the Brahms) and Jelte Althuis (the rest) – the pieces are supposedly made clearer and their content more human. Largely, it works.

For a start, the playing is faultless and the sense of ensemble exemplary, while the arrangements beautifully exploit the different timbres in combinations mirroring the sound of various organ stops. Especially beautiful is the Brahms chorale prelude 'O Welt, ich muss dich lassen', Op. 122 No. 3, where the cor anglais carries the chorale while the others support it with a twilit cushion of colour.

The repertoire ranges all the way from Sweelinck to Florence Price. Many works will be unfamiliar to non-organ specialists and a fair number of gems emerge. Outstanding among them is Duruflé's *Prélude et Fugue sur le non d'Alain*, a piece of some otherworldly beauty, paying tribute to Jehan Alain whose *Litanies* precedes it.

The programme itself works slightly less well, however, largely because of the preponderance of minor-key pieces and the relatively limited range of the sonic colours available to a wind quintet, even with players doubling on different registers of saxophones or bass and contrabass clarinets. Possibly the most striking musical contrast, however, arrives in Sebastián Aguilera de Heredia's 'Ensalada': a Renaissance work which breaks abruptly into a rhapsodic Middle Eastern section that could almost have come straight out of *Lawrence of Arabia*. *Jessica Duchen* ★★★★

String Creatures

Works by Liza Lim
JACK Quartet; Rohan Dasika (double bass)
NMC NMCD294 64:15 mins

A disc of Lim's music was the Concerto Choice in October, and her imagination is equally honed on a small scale, although her musical language won't appeal to everyone, being far from tonal, and often acerbic in timbre and texture. The first movement of *String Creatures* – 'Cat's Cradle (3 diagrams of grief)' – opens with a keening anger, underpinned by a strong rhythmic pulse, as the players in the JACK Quartet attack their instruments with barely restrained violence: wood on string, harmonics, glissandi and silences as important as sound. The gentler second movement – 'Untethered' – cycles round repeated figures, gradually expanding, but, despite the title, is often tethered by pedal notes; and the last – 'A nest is woven from the inside out' – grows from small melodic fragments, which gradually coalesce until the structure is complete. *The Weaver's Knot* is also focused on construction, but it's grainier and more tightly cinched.

In *an ocean beyond earth*, Jay Campbell's cello is physically attached by strings to a retuned violin suspended a few feet in front of him, and the sonic palette that he conjures up is impressive, although I felt that it outstayed its welcome in its stasis. *The Table of Knowledge* sees Rohan Dasika exploring a vast range of sounds and moods with some dance-like patterns; and a linen thread spanning the space between his mouth and his instrument in the last of the five movements creates bizarre resonances. Again, the idea is impressive, and the timbres extraordinary, but, unlike the works for quartet, this didn't add up for me. *Martin Cotton* ★★★★

There I long to be

Works by Dowland, Hume et al
Ensemble Galilei
Sono Luminus SLE-70042 111:20 mins

This is a touching, low-key mix of folk and classical tracks, assembled onto a rather original two-CD set, though they had been intended as two separate releases. The highly personal story of their origination with serious illness, cancelled planes and much else, is narrated in so much detail in gambist Carolyn Surrick's deeply felt liner note that we don't find out nearly enough about the music or the performers.

Among the 34 tracks there is lovely recorder playing (presumably Kathryn Montoya), but composer of these fantasias Pieter de Vois is not identified as the blind pupil of Sweelinck. The lute playing of Ronn McFarlane is outstanding in the 'Suzanna Galliard', and he is joined by fine British tenor James Oxley in some light-voiced Dowland, Bennett and Corkine songs.

The ensemble has been established for 35 years, and the playing of the core group of five is always careful and rarely extrovert, though there is a touch of welcome liveliness in the Irish reels 'Aggie Whyte's' and 'The Old Blackthorn Stick'. Among the additions, I am not sure that the use of a gloomy saxophone with gamba in the Irish air 'Cape Clear' is a success, but 'The Leaving of St Kilda' is an evocative number, and there are some deft arrangements of traditional reels and a final Irish Slide, 'Scattery Island'.

Does the mix of genres work? Yes, the risk was justified, and if you like a touch of lute-song among your varied reels you will love this, but the whole experience suggests listening on a mellow late evening. *Nicholas Kenyon* ★★★

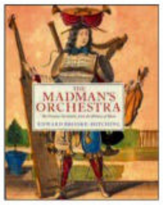
Books

Our critics cast their eyes over the latest selection of books on all things music

The Madman's Orchestra: The Greatest Curiosities from the History of Music

Edward Brooke-Hitching

Simon & Schuster 978-1-398-53240-3 256pp (hb) £30



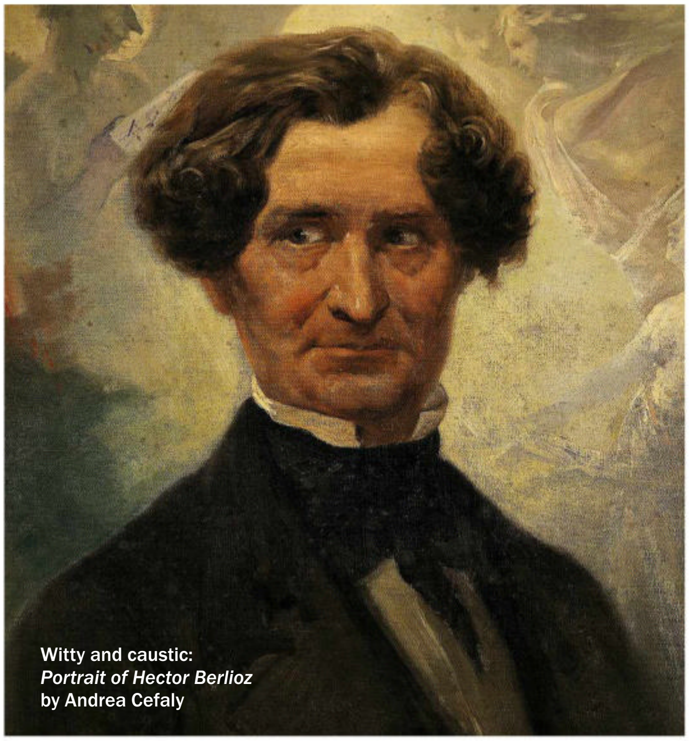
This is a fascinating compendium of classical curiosities, thoroughly researched and charmingly written by Edward Brooke-Hitching, which perhaps is no surprise given his work as a scriptwriter and factfinder for BBC's *QI*. He's clearly poured great care into this book, filling it with a sense of boundless discovery. Across nine themed chapters, he takes us on a tour of the 'murky alleyway' around the side of more official histories, via intriguing topics including 'visible music' (think synaesthesia, ocular harpsichords and colour organs) and 'musical hoaxes' (such as Berlioz's critic-fooling alter ego Pierre Ducré).

There are playlists to explore at the end of each themed chapter, as well as spreads of gossipy composer quotes, musical terms and instructions. Care has been taken over the details. There's a wonderfully generous selection of images, from the ancient Chauvet cave paintings to John Stump's crammed 'Faerie's Aire and Death Waltz' 1980 score, complete with instructions to 'inflate the circus clowns'. Sadly, I can't unsee the photo of the 'badgermin', a 'customised' theremin. And the many footnotes are full of tantalising trivia. In one, I learned that there are two speeds of sound on the planet Mars. All in all, a delight. *Rebecca Franks* ★★★★★

Berlioz The Critic: Selected Writings From 1837-1850

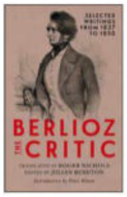
Trans. Roger Nichols; Ed. Julian Rushton

University of Rochester Press 978-1-648-25073-6 314pp (hb) £85



Witty and caustic: *Portrait of Hector Berlioz* by Andrea Cefaly

Berlioz is a humbling figure for those of us trying to write about music. He stands among the greatest to discuss music in print despite regarding writing as a tiresome secondary activity, a necessary evil even, behind his passion for composing. And yet, his sharp ear and eye, unsurpassed knowledge and addictively witty, frequently caustic, yet always insightful articles bring to life the musical world of Paris and beyond.



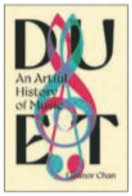
Berlioz The Critic presents a generous selection from 58 articles spanning the years 1837 to 1850, few previously translated, and featuring an extensive cast of contemporaries including Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Rossini, Cherubini and Gounod. A conscious sequel to Katherine Kolb's 2015 *Berlioz On Music*, which covered the first 13 years of his literary career, the articles here are chosen and beautifully translated with typically compelling grace by Roger Nichols, edited by Julian Rushton and with an eloquent introduction by Peter Bloom. It is much hoped that the resources for a concluding third volume can be found, for *Berlioz The Critic* is a thoroughly absorbing delight from beginning to end. *Christopher Dingle* ★★★★★

Duet

Eleanor Chan

Duckworth Books 978-0-715-65571-9 352pp (hb) £25

The duet referred to in the title of Eleanor Chan's new book describes the interaction of music with other art forms and the physical environment. Specifically, Chan examines how our experiences of music are shaped by elements outside of music itself, and how we often make use of visual strategies to articulate our responses. How much, for example, is the perception that King's is the outstanding college choir in Cambridge shaped by its magnificent chapel? Why do some individuals associate specific notes and keys with particular colours? How significant was Taylor's Swift's use of a 'sugar-frosted candyfloss' grand piano at the 2019 American Music Awards?



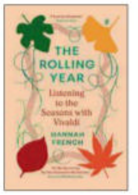
Chan is an art historian, musician, painter and writer, and brings a polymathic breadth of reference to bear on such questions. Occasionally the accumulation of detail is suffocating – the section on scales and temperament will surely stretch the non-specialist reader – and Chan's first-person reflections can sit uneasily with her generally scholarly style. But there's a formidable amount of stimulating material here, illuminating where music sits in the global cultural ecosystem. *Terry Blain* ★★★

The Rolling Year: Listening to the Seasons with Vivaldi

Hannah French

Faber & Faber 978-0-571-39199-8 360pp (hb) £20

Hats off to broadcaster and Early Music specialist Hannah French. It's no small feat to bring fresh perspectives to a work that turns 300 this year, but her guide to Vivaldi's Baroque masterpiece should please well-seasoned and new listeners alike. Wearing her scholarly persona lightly, her deep knowledge nevertheless underscores every page, as does her enthusiasm for nudging us to reflect on the cyclical rhythms of time and nature.



Considering each violin concerto and prefacing sonnet in turn, French draws us ever closer to the contrasting features of the four seasons. She conjures a vast, multi-layered collage that displays the history, sights and sounds of Vivaldi's Venice, alongside an intimate portrait of the composer himself. We experience the brutality of winter, the epic storms and oppressive heat of summer, delve into the nooks and crannies of Venetian streets, and encounter the birds and wildlife that populate Vivaldi's score. There are vignettes from cookbooks and paintings, alongside insights from leading interpreters. An exhilarating multi-sensory exploration of the elements through still dazzling music. *Suzanne Rolt* ★★★★

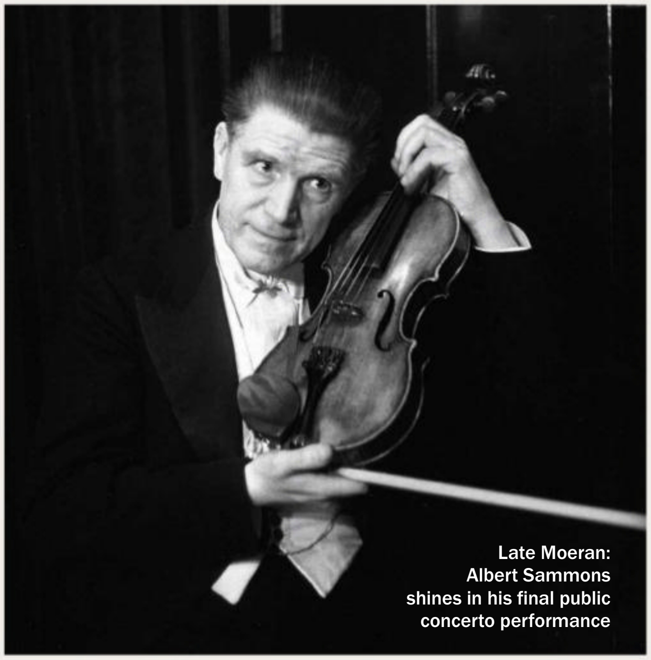
From the archives

Andrew McGregor looks over this month's reissued and live archive recordings

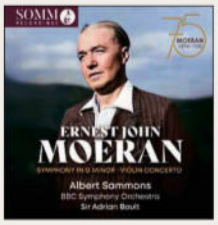
ARCHIVE CHOICE

Poignant pastoralism

An evocative portrait of Moeran's orchestral eloquence and affinity with Irish folk music



Late Moeran: Albert Sammons shines in his final public concerto performance



Moeran

Symphony in G Minor & Violin Concerto

Albert Sammons (violin); BBC Symphony Orchestra/Sir Adrian Boult

Somm ARIADNE5045 74:45 mins

On 1 December, in 1950, in the town of Kenmare in County Kerry, a body was seen falling from the pier into the bay during a fierce storm. It was the English composer Ernest John Moeran, who'd made his home there, reconnecting with his Irish roots after being wounded in the First World War, struggling with alcoholism and a strained marriage to the cellist Peers Coetmore. Irish folk music, landscape and the Atlantic coastline inhabit much of the music in these three major works with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Sir Adrian Boult, broadcast recordings from the 1940s. The G Minor Symphony shares a rugged beauty with Sibelius, and Boult conducts it with sweeping passion. Moeran always wanted Albert Sammons to play his Violin Concerto, but the great violinist was on the point of retiring... We're lucky to have this recording from Sammons's last public concerto performance, still wonderfully eloquent. The Cello Concerto played by Moeran's wife isn't mentioned on the cover, perhaps because it's sometimes as effortful as the relationship. Vital documents, re-mastered by Lani Spahr. ★★★

Monthly round-up

Lani Spahr was for years the oboist in Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, founded in 1815. It gave the first US performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*, Christopher Hogwood turned them into a period instrument orchestra, and ***Harry Christophers*** first conducted them at the Esterházy Palace in Eisenstadt, on the very stage where Haydn gave the first performances of his Symphonies Nos 6-8, under the ceiling paintings of *Le Matin*, *Le Midi* and *Le Soir* that inspired them. In 2016 they finished their concert recordings of the trilogy, still amongst the most intimate and engaging Haydn performances from Christophers's tenure as artistic director. *(CORO COR16214)* ★★★★

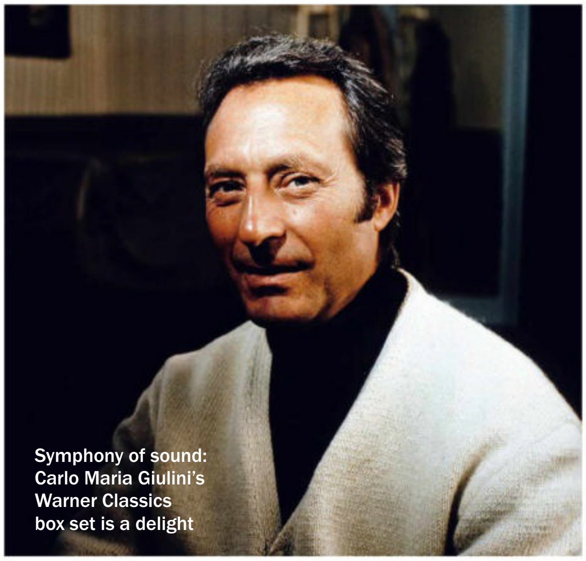
There's nothing historically-informed about French violinist ***Renée Chemet***'s Handel and Haydn, from her complete HMV recordings 1920-26, but her rich timbre and technique sear through the century with immediacy – it's easy to hear why Chemet was admired on both sides of the English Channel, as well as in Japan and America, where she was celebrated as 'the French Kreisler'. Henry Wood was a fan, auditioning her for the Proms in 1904. Nothing here with orchestra sadly, but don't miss powerful performances of Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*, the Saint-Saëns *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, as well as brilliant Wieniawski. *(Biddulph 85064-2)* ★★★

Chemet died in 1977, four years after Hungarian ***Joseph Szigeti***, who was one of the great violinists of their generation to revive his career after the Second World War. Szigeti attacks Bach's solo Chaconne in 1955 with uncompromising ferocity, and thick, treacly vibrato. The Beethoven A minor Sonata a decade earlier with Claudio Arrau is a happier fit, alert and athletic, and the Bartók *Rhapsody* has the instinct for the folk influences you'd expect with the composer at the piano. Ernest Bloch's Violin Concerto was written for Szigeti, and it feels like it in this free-flowing 1939 recording with Munch conducting in Paris. *(Parnassus PACL95018)* ★★★

Emil Gilels and ***Tatiana Nikolayeva***, two of the great Soviet-era pianists playing Tchaikovsky in Moscow with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kirill Kondrashin, is a formidable combination. Live in 1962 in Tchaikovsky's Concerto No. 2 (with Siloti's cuts), Gilels is a tumultuous whirlwind in the outer movements, a melancholy minstrel in the *Andante* between them. In the *Concert Fantasia*, Nikolayeva is more classically precise, but surging with passion. Slightly unkempt period orchestral sound and brass vibrato, some splashiness from Gilels in concert, but Kondrashin is an alert accompanist. *(Alto ALC1711)* ★★★

In Bach's *St John Passion* from ***King's College, Cambridge***, recorded in the mid-1990s, the trebles are in excellent form. As Evangelist, John Mark Ainsley is a gifted storyteller; Pilate's turmoil is eloquently portrayed by Stephen Varcoe, and Stephen Richardson is a darkly troubled Christus. Fine singing, too, from Catherine Bott, Michael Chance and Paul Agnew. The period instrument playing of the Brandenburg Consort is outstanding and Stephen Cleobury's direction is clear. This is the 1724 *St John* with an appendix of the alternative 1725 numbers, previously on Brilliant Classics. *(Alto ALC 2033)* ★★★★

Andrew McGregor is the presenter of Radio 3's *Record Review*, broadcast each Saturday afternoon from 2pm-4pm



Symphony of sound: Carlo Maria Giulini's Warner Classics box set is a delight

GETTY

Unboxed

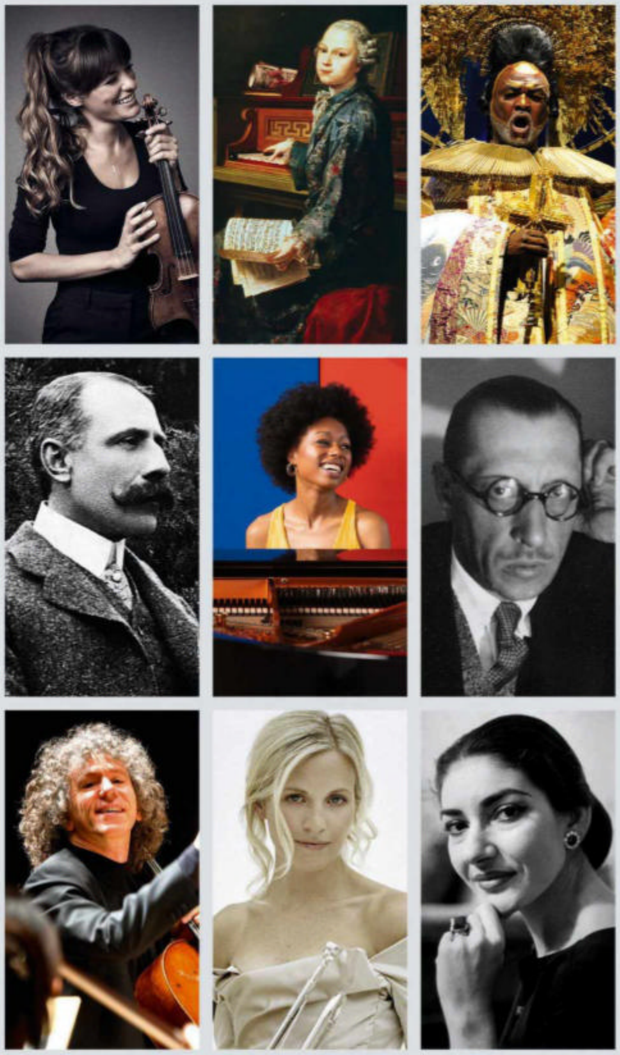
This month's round-up spotlights orchestral magic, a tribute to Pavarotti and Baroque gems

Warner Classics's ***Dvořák: Symphonies 7-9, Cello Concerto and Saint-Saëns: Cello Concerto*** *(Warner Classics 2173276722)* nine-disc collection presents in Hybrid SACD format for the first time recordings of works from each composer by Carlo Maria Giulini with cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and the London Philharmonic and Philharmonia orchestras. These newly mastered works bring a real clarity to Giulini's brilliant interpretations and guidance of the orchestra throughout each piece, whilst Rostropovich's playing is both commanding and deeply expressive. From the brooding intensity in Dvořák's Seventh Symphony to the grandeur of his beloved 'New World', each work is performed with sensitivity and insight. The inclusion of Saint-Saëns's Cello Concerto, meanwhile, adds a sparkling contrast and showcases Rostropovich's extraordinary virtuosity. This release is both a truly enjoyable listen and a historical document worth treasuring.

Luciano Pavarotti and Decca Records shared a widely celebrated exclusive artist-record label partnership for many years, and this box set beautifully celebrates that legacy. Released on what would have been the tenor's birthday, 12 October, ***Novanta*** *(Decca 4871410)* features a curated selection of some of Pavarotti's most iconic performances, including tear-jerking arias like *La bohème*'s 'Che gelida manina'. The set also includes the singer's 1967 recording of 'Ingemisco' from Verdi's Requiem, alongside rare gems such as three *Pavarotti & Friends* duets with Queen, Lou Reed and Barry White and three arias from the previously unreleased Llangollen concert. This is a monumental 74-disc catalogue that pays homage to one of opera's greatest voices.

Erato's ***Alessandro Scarlatti Edition: Cantatas, Motets, Oratorios, Concerti Grossi, Sonatas*** *(Erato 2173281006)* is a nine-disc collection showcasing the extraordinary breadth of the Italian's compositional output, encompassing both sacred and secular repertoire. The release highlights the composer's position as a key figure of Italian Baroque who also shaped the emerging elegance of the Classical aesthetic, and performances throughout this meticulously curated box-set, consisting of everything from dramatic cantatas to intricate instrumental pieces, are first-class. ***Miranda Bardsley***

www.classical-music.com



GETTY, ROBIN CLEWLEY, MAT HENNEK, ANDY GOTTS, SATOSHI AOYAGI

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CLASSICAL MUSIC

Audio gift guide

From booming soundbars to natty new headphones and the perfect care kit for vinyl fans, *Chris Haslam* has inspiration for the music lover in your life

THIS MONTH: IT'S CHRISTMAS...!

Slim but loud: the room-filling Bluesound Pulse Cinema Mini

THINKING BIG

Bluesound Pulse Cinema Mini £799

Launched just in time for Christmas, this wonderfully compact (850x74x140mm), fully-featured Dolby Atmos soundbar boasts a size-defying 280 watts of high-resolution audio from eight precision-tuned drivers. And when you don't need it to punch up the audio performance on the latest blockbuster, BluOS, the brand's own high-resolution streaming platform, enables you to stream in lossless quality throughout your home via aptX Adaptive Bluetooth and AirPlay 2. Bluesound also sells a range of amplifiers, speakers and streamers. **bluesound.com**

HERE TO STAY

POCA Pine Beat £169

While traditional hi-fi can last decades, modern battery-powered speakers and headphones have a long way to go in terms of longevity. One British start-up brand on a mission to keep hi-fi out of landfill is POCA, which has designed a Bluetooth speaker that features a long-lasting user-swappable battery and clever, upgradeable design. The aluminium casing houses a 2.5" neodymium driver and 1.25" tweeter, it is completely waterproof – it even floats – and the clever modular construction means that if parts do fail, they can be easily swapped out. **pocaaudio.co.uk**

BEST IN SHOW

Glorious Record Vinyl Frame £49

While records should be played rather than displayed, this update to the classic album frame really makes the most of your favourite LPs and is a lovely idea for the collector in your house. The cover and record are set securely in a foam insert, and there's a pin to keep the vinyl in position so there's no risk of slippage or damage, while the aluminium frame looks great. Acrylic glass is used for added safety and, mercifully, there's a magnetic side clip that lets you swap – and play – records easily. **glorious.de**

Forget me not: Technica's hard-to-lose earbuds

MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

Technica ATH-CKS50TW2 Earbuds £125

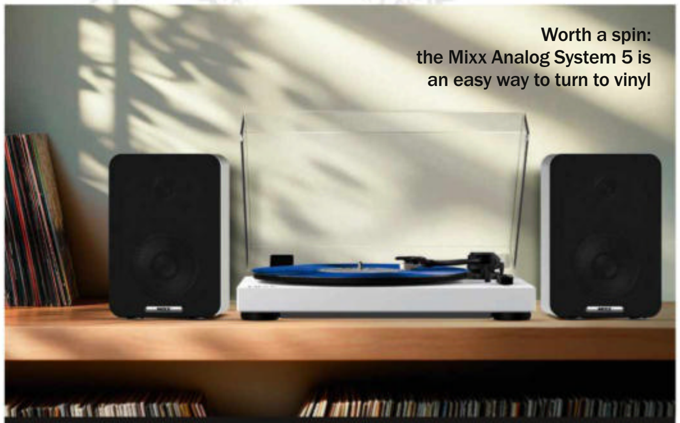
The perfect gift for the forgetful music fan, these feature-packed Active Noise Cancelling (ANC) earbuds have a feature for anyone – my wife, for example – who seems incapable of putting their earbuds back in the carry case once they've finished listening. Instead, the earbuds can magnetically clip together and go into standby mode, helping to preserve the battery. But in truth, with a whopping 15 hours of battery per earbud, you won't need the case for recharging very often... which is handy if they happen to have misplaced that too. **audio-technica.com**

Pristine performance: keep your vinyl collection in tip-top condition

NEEDLE CRAFT

Goldring Extract Stylus Kit £39

Goldring's new stylus cleaning kit is a must-have for anyone who loves playing vinyl but is plagued by dust. Designed to suit all cartridge types, it features a 10x magnifying lens that lets you see just how gunked up your needle has become – and how clean it is after you've treated it. The super practical anti-static brush removes dust and fluff without shedding, and a specially formulated gel carefully lifts any stubborn residue without harming the stylus or cantilever bond. **goldring.co.uk**



Worth a spin: the Mixx Analog System 5 is an easy way to turn to vinyl

FLIP TO VINYL

Mixx Analog System 5 £299

Budget gramophone-style turntable and speaker systems are convenient, but they usually sound poor and use cheap, record-gouging styluses. Vinyl costs too much to risk, which is why this old-school all-in-one is a better option for first-time listeners. It pairs a simple belt-driven turntable with a set of 50W active stereo speakers and a quality Audio-Technica AT3600L moving magnet cartridge that's easy to upgrade for better sound. Setup is effortless, connecting directly to the master speaker, which includes Bluetooth streaming and a remote control – however, kids, remember that you'll still need to flip the record. **mixx-audio.com**

Space saver: the Pure Classic C-D4 contains a lot in one small box

KITCHEN AID

Pure Classic C-D4 £149

Available in deep walnut brown or white oak, this classical looking, wood-clad 15 watt music cube boasts DAB+/FM with 80 channel presets, colour display, remote control, aux-in, Bluetooth for streaming from smartphone, full clock radio features including snooze, plus a good-old-fashioned CD player. At just 12.7cm tall and 20.5cm wide it will sit neatly in your office or kitchen and give you an opportunity to finally catch up on all our fantastic *BBC Music Magazine* cover CDs. **pure-audio.com**

LISTEN IN LUXURY

Bowers & Wilkins PX8 S2 £629

If you find yourself close to the top of Santa's 'Nice' list, make the most of it and ask for the latest flagship headphone from Bowers & Wilkins. Luxury doesn't come cheap, but every aspect of these over-ear ANC wireless headphones is sheer class, from the nappa leather earcups and headband to the precision-milled aluminium arms. I can happily attest to how engaging they are, with a tight, controlled bass and phenomenal clarity across all frequencies. **bowerswilkins.com**

Quick switch: the new KEF Coda W active speakers

In store for 2026...

Given the resurgence in love for vinyl and CDs, I'd love to predict that 2026 will be the year of the Minidisc. Sadly, Sony has no plans to resurrect its 1990s masterpiece, but nostalgia and the desire to have a connection with music beyond streaming will continue to grow. Having everything a click away is convenient, but there's an argument that streaming is making us passive, rather than engaged, listeners.

What does that mean for audio brands? We'll see more multi-format systems and a host of accessible, better quality all-in-one turntables with streaming. Premium brands are certainly embracing the stylish one-box solution that bridges the gap between ultra-luxury and mass-market. Cambridge, Naim, Bowers & Wilkins, Technics and Ruark already offer wonderfully entertaining just-add-speaker systems, while the new KEF Coda W active speakers (above) enable you to seamlessly switch from vinyl to streaming when the mood strikes.

Despite our lust for nostalgia, not many of us will be forgoing streaming, and the race is on to see who can produce a streaming codec that can match – or surpass – the brilliance of a basic cable. It won't be long.

TV&Radio

We pick out 2025 seasonal highlights, from John Rutter carols to a Jane Austen yuletide

John Rutter at 80

Donald Macleod visits John Rutter at home in this celebratory series of *Composer of the Week*, looking back at the highs and lows of his extraordinary career. We hear about the full breadth of his musical adventures – including his recent all-orchestral album – garnished with a liberal sprinkling of the evocative carols that made his name.
Radio 3, 1-5 December, 4pm

Christmas Around Europe

Uniting listeners across the European Broadcasting Union, this special day of programming brings together 14 concerts from 12 countries, including Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* from Stockholm, traditional Ukrainian carols in Kyiv and music of the Iberian Renaissance live from Madrid.
Radio 3, 14 December, from 12noon

This Classical Life: Guy Barker

Jess Gillam's festive guest on *This Classical Life* is the British jazz trumpeter, composer and bandleader Guy Barker. The two swap stories and play an eclectic mix of their favourite Christmas music.
Radio 3, 20 December, 5pm

A Georgian Christmas

At Jane Austen's House in Hampshire, Donald Macleod is joined by historian Amanda Vickery to explore the festive soundworld of the Regency period through the lens of the great 19th-century British author's life and novels.
Radio 3, 22-26 December, 4pm

Messiah with the Monteverdi Choir

Christophe Rousset conducts Handel's choral favourite in this unmissable performance from St Martin-in-the-Fields, with an all-star lineup of soloists, including British mezzo-soprano Dame Sarah Connolly.
Radio 3, 22 December, 7.30pm

THE 12 SHOWS OF CHRISTMAS

GETTY

A sparkling start to 2026: the New Year's Day Concert from Vienna's Musikverein

The Essay: Winterreisen

Are you sitting comfortably? Grab a cup of cocoa and tune in for three new stories about Christmas journeys inspired by Schubert's *Winterreise* song cycle, by award-winning writers Mark Haddon, Wendy Erskine and Jo Lloyd.
Radio 3, 22-24 December, 9.45pm

How to Play: The Snowman

Eavesdrop on rehearsals for a special screening of the beloved 1982 Christmas animated film *The Snowman*, based on the charming 1978 picture book by Raymond Briggs. Get an insight into what goes through musicians' minds as they prepare to perform the soundtrack live in concert, including its hit song, 'Walking in the Air'.
Radio 4, 23 December, time TBC

Carols from King's

It wouldn't be Christmas without it… The world-famous choir's traditional candlelit celebration, from the magnificent Chapel of King's College, Cambridge, is an annual appointment-to-watch, with the radio repeat on Christmas Day as the perfect soundtrack to chopping parsnips.
BBC Two, 24 December, time TBC; Radio 3, 25 December, 1pm

James MacMillan's Christmas Oratorio

The Scottish composer conducts his life-affirming take on the majesty and mystery of the nativity story – performed by baritone Roderick Williams, soprano Rhian Lois and the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.
Radio 3, 25 December, 7.30pm

The Royal Ballet's Nutcracker

World-class dancers take us on an adventure to a snowy, sweet-filled fairyland in Peter Wright's production of Tchaikovsky's perennial masterpiece *The Nutcracker* – a surefire hit for all the family.
BBC Two, date and time TBC

Inside Classical: A Classical Christmas

The BBC Concert Orchestra and BBC Singers take centre stage in a seasonal special from Snape Maltings Concert Hall in Suffolk, with orchestral party pieces from Mykola Leontovych and Leroy Anderson. Plus, R&B and jazz singer Tony Momrelle joins them for highlights from the *Great American Christmas Songbook*.
Radio Four, date and time TBC

New Year's Day Concert from Vienna

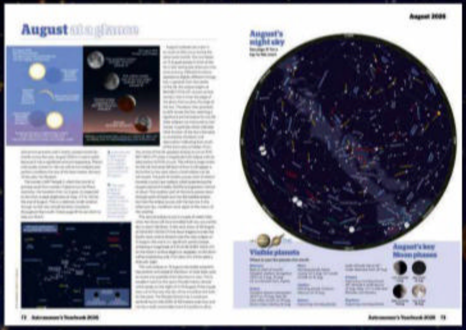
Canadian conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin leads the Vienna Philharmonic in this year's lively programme of waltzes and more by the family of Johann Strauss and its contemporaries in the resplendent Golden Hall of the Vienna Musikverein – a guaranteed way to start 2026 with a spring in your step.
BBC Two, 1 January, time TBC, with evening highlights on BBC Four

QUIZ ANSWERS from p104

1. a) Handel's *Messiah*; b) Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*; c) Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*
2. a) *Vakula the Smith* (or, in its later version, *The Slippers*); b) *La bohème*; c) *Werther*
3. Harp
4. Henry VIII
5. They were all born on 25 December
6. Geese-a-laying and Swans-a-swimming (42 each)
7. *The Little Drummer Boy*
8. Vaughan Williams. The composer introduced it at the Three Choirs Festival, which took place in September
9. Macaronic carols – 'macaronic' texts feature more than one language (often English and Latin)
10. Alastair Cook, who was then a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral

FROM THE MAKERS OF BBC Sky at Night MAGAZINE

The Astronomer's Yearbook 2026

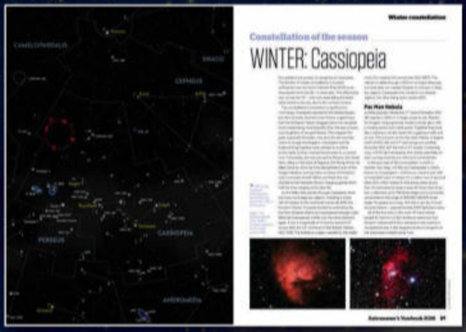

August at a glance

August's night sky

Visible planets

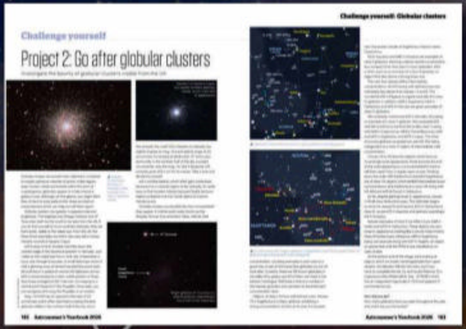
August's key Moon phases

Our month-by-month guide and detailed star charts reveal what to look for and when, from stars and planets to Moon phases and more


Constellation of the season

WINTER: Cassiopeia

Get to know the stand-out constellations of each season, as we highlight their brightest targets and how to best observe them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BBC Sky at Night MAGAZINE

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IT'S QUIZMAS!

Indulge in some festive cheer with our ten seasonal teasers

1. In which works do these famous Christmas moments appear: a) 'For unto us a child is born' chorus (1742); b) The shepherds' farewell (1854); c) The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy (1892)?

2. Name the operas by the following that take place partly or wholly on Christmas Eve: a) Tchaikovsky (1876); b) Puccini (1896); c) Massenet (1892)

3. Composed in 1942, Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* is scored for three-part treble/soprano choir and which instrument?

4. Not generally known for fostering religious harmony, who composed the carol 'Green Groweth the Holly' in c.1512?

5. What Christmas-related fact links the composers Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625), Jean-Joseph de Mondonville (1711-72) and Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-99)?

6. By the end of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, which two gifts has the singer received more of in total than all the others?

7. Which 1941 festive song by Katherine Kennicott Davis was taken to No. 3 in the UK pop chart by Bing Crosby (posthumously) and David Bowie (both above) in 1982?

8. Whose *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* was premiered, rather unseasonally, in Hereford Cathedral on 12 September 1912? And why was it performed then?

9. *Ding dong! Merrily on high*, *In dulci jubilo* and *The Boar's Head Carol* are all examples of what type of carol?

10. Which future England cricket player sang Adam's *O Holy Night* with soprano Kiri Te Kanawa at a concert in December 1997?

See p102 for answers

The *BBC Music Magazine* PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 419

Crossword set by **Paul Henderson**

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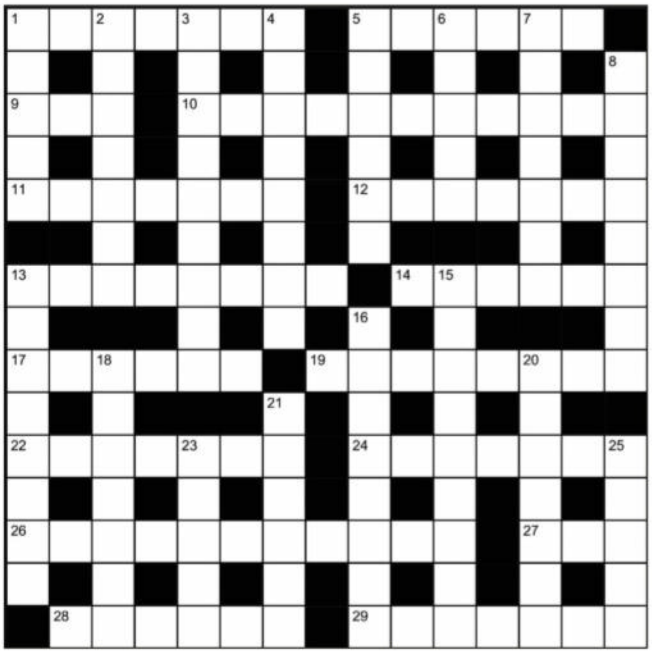
The first correct solution of our crossword picked at random will win an exclusive **BBC Music Magazine Coffee Mug** (not available to purchase). To enter, send answers to: *BBC Music Magazine*, Crossword 419/ Xmas 2025, PO Box 501, Leicester, LE94 0AA to arrive by 30 Dec 2025 (solution in March 2026 issue).



Your name & address ....

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ACROSS

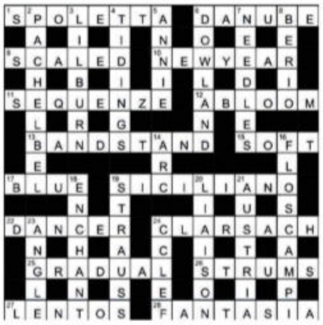
1 Secure two pianos including one large, finally heaving item for 13a 19 overture (7)
5 13a 19 composer nevertheless earless to some extent (6)
9 One pair of notes in bar (3)
10 Piece for 13a 19 scored with tonic misplaced (11)
11 Master of King's Music associated with Accrington? (7)
12 Fellow with endless vocation as director-composer (7)
13 Musical cartoonist showing husband on holiday with religious woman heading for Greece (8)
14 Caught French article about song from soprano Booth (6)
17 13a 19 composer is drunk with beer (6)
19 Version in E flat is playing in celebration (8)
22 Modern performer very quiet about love, beginning to peter out? (3,4)
24 Ravel movement seasonal production presented with hesitation? (7)
26 Pedal foot is near, wobbling – as in these instruments? (11)
27 Devour each opening for trombones (3)
28 Said: 'More than satisfied about tenor' (6)
29 Postulate providing organ stops (7)

DOWN

1 British line is taken by second British composer (5)
2 Fan glad to represent theme for Howard Shore? (7)
3 Laziness? No decline in playing (9)
4 Trying one of three works by Barber in G (8)
5 Soprano going to bed with choir? It's the whisky! (6)
6 A pair of contraltos joining artist in African capital (5)
7 Traditional knowledge applied to garland for rock singer? (7)
8 DJ a legend in folk music? (4,4)
13 Concerto instrument for 13a 19? Vaguely hopes one will take exercises (8)
15 Arrangement of tune in catalogues for string players (9)
16 Look up entries in some truly execrable piece to maintain tempo? (4,4)
18 Fix brusque introduction from Led Zeppelin singer? (7)
20 Unrestrained old instrument? Bloke's no good with that (7)
21 Polisher finally adopted by one former 13a 19 composer (6)
23 Runs into someone selling tickets for Schubert quintet (5)
25 Second elevation of appropriate theme (5)

OCTOBER SOLUTION

No. 416



OCTOBER WINNER

Gregory Porilo, London

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NEXT MONTH on sale from 30 December (UK)

Nicholas McCarthy

The British pianist, who made his Proms debut this year, talks to *Claire Jackson* about forging a career as a one-handed performer

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PAUL MARC MITCHELL, ANDREW STAPLES, GETTY

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PLUS! As he marks his 80th birthday, composer ***Colin Matthews*** speaks to *Michael White*; *Karishmeh Felfeli-Crawford* explores the popularity of the ***piano in India***; *Andrew Green* delves into ***David Bowie***'s classical influences; and take a break with Bach's ***Coffee Cantata***

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Music that changed me

Rakhi Singh

Violinist and Composer

Rakhi Singh is a British violinist and composer known for her innovative multi-genre programming. She is music director and co-founder of Manchester Collective, and collaborates with artists from Steve Reich and Björk to Vessel. Her solo album *Purnima* came out in 2023. Singh appears at the Highgate International Chamber Music Festival on 4 December 2025 with leading classical-folk fusion players and djembe player Sidiki Dembélé.

PHIL SHARP/MANCHESTER COLLECTIVE

> 'Having a mix of cultures at home helped inform my musical tastes'

My mum is a violin teacher to young kids – she studied the Kodály method in Budapest, and the house was always full of children playing violin, piano, singing and playing games. I don't remember when I started violin – I think it was just placed under my chin! My mum is English and my dad is Indian, and having a mix of cultures at home has helped to inform my musical tastes. Dad and his friends used to sing Bollywood hits as they were cooking and still we have **NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN** on when we're cooking curry!

When I was about eight, my dad drove me from our home in Llandybie to watch the finals of BBC Young Musician of the Year in Cardiff. Seeing 15-year-old Nicola Loud win the competition playing the **BRUCH** Violin Concerto, I thought, 'I'd like to do that.' It was the first time that I'd seen a kid in front of an orchestra and I remember her green dress. Then in 1996, when I was 14, I had my own Nicola Loud moment – I played the Bruch Concerto with orchestra in the final of the Audi Junior Musician competition in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, and I won!

The following year my dad took me to see *The English Patient* at the cinema – I think he was bored but I was incredibly moved. As a teenager you get all emotional anyway, but it was the music that really struck me. They'd overlaid an amazing Hungarian singer, **MÁRTA SEBESTYÉN**, singing *Szerelem, szerelem* (Love, Love) over the Aria from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. We already had a connection with Hungary because of my mum's studies in Budapest and the holidays we spent there, but the timbre of Márta's voice reminded me of Indian singing, with its guttural folk timbre. Just recalling it, I can feel the texture of it, like a grainy chocolate. The way it was laid over the Bach Aria resonated with me as a 15 year-old, and it's interesting that the type of programming I do now mixes cultures. There's always a root of classical, but I put surprises on top.

BACH's *Goldberg Variations* is another piece I have spent a lot of time with – hearing it on piano in *The English Patient*, I went on to play the string trio version with Manchester Collective, and as a dance piece with the Scottish Ensemble, which we toured all over the world. I've had a similar experience with Bach's Chaconne, which I've played with a Welsh dance company and also in concert, and I'm planning another version with electronics.

In 2005, after my master's at the Royal Academy of Music, I did some freelance work with Opera North, playing **BARTÓK**'s *Bluebeard's Castle*, with John Tomlinson as Bluebeard. I loved getting under the skin of this incredible music. It's Gothic with elements of horror, but the orchestral writing is reminiscent of Ravel's colour and harmony. At the same time, I was visiting my brother in Budapest and listening to gypsy music, so familiar from our family holidays and our visits to the vineyards and the lake. Playing Bartók, who is mid-20th century, and his sophisticated orchestral writing, which is rooted in folk, felt like being immersed in the rich Hungarian culture for that year.

Around 2015, a friend invited me to a gig by the **PUNCH BROTHERS**, an American bluegrass/classical band who are impossible to categorise. At that gig I thought, 'Oh, my pelvis is moving by itself!' You'll see what I mean if you watch them play 'Movement and Location', for example. Of course I'd danced at gigs, but there was something about being in that room with those musicians that was intoxicating. I loved the power of the groove. I'm lucky to work with people with incredible rhythm but I miss that sometimes in the classical world – and rhythmic power can grab you more than pitch. There's groove in a lot of classical music, but you're not encouraged to find it. I'm drawn to those artists who do. I've toured with Hiromi, the jazz pianist, and she has groove chops, and harmony and melody chops as well.

Working with cellist Abel Selaocoe, I'm in that space a lot. Sometimes in classical music you have to break the mould. Look at **NIGEL KENNEDY**; he was doing it 30 years ago, but he was looked down on by many people. I find his recordings really inspiring now, and think he just needed to be his own person. And what kind of artist are you if you're not being yourself?

Interview by Amanda Holloway

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